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The New Criterion

A monthly review *edited by Hilton Kramer*

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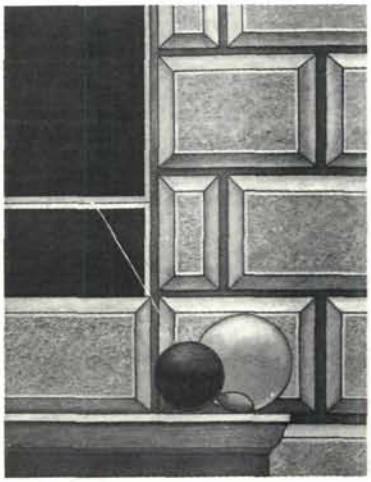

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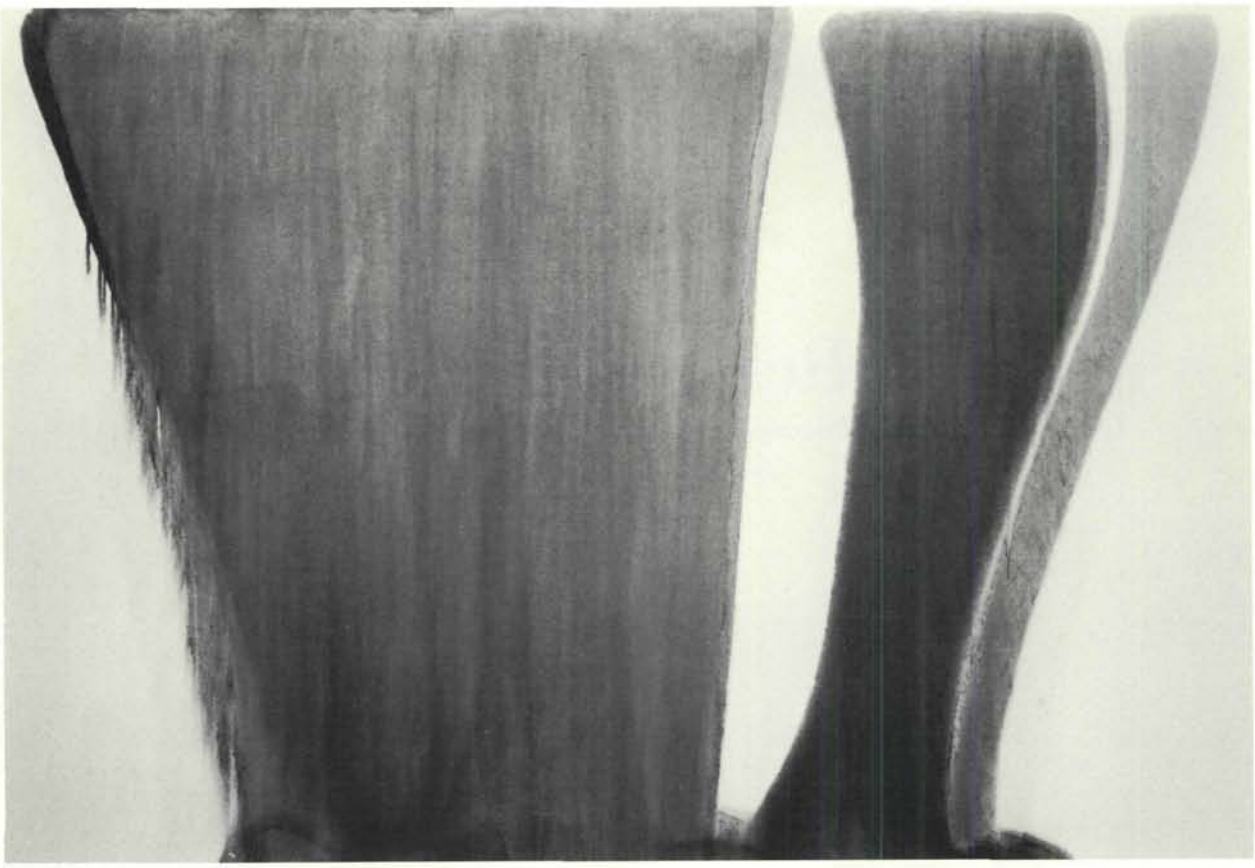

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Contributors to this issue

Bruce Bawer wrote on Truman Capote for the June issue of *The New Criterion.*

Allan Bloom is a director at the John M. Olin Center for Inquiry into the Theory and Practice of Democracy at the University of Chicago and Professor in the Committee on Social Thought. His essay was originally published in the French magazine *Commentaire.*

Michael Brandow, who works in a bank, is a free-lance translator and interpreter.

Joseph Epstein's newest collection of essays is entitled *Plausible Prejudices* (W. W. Norton).

Joseph Frank is the author of *The Seeds of Revolt, 1821-1849* and *The Years of Ordeal, 1850-1859,* the first two volumes of a biography of Dostoevsky.

S. J. Freedberg is Chief Curator at the National Gallery of Art in Washington and Arthur Kingsley Porter Professor of Fine Arts, Emeritus, at Harvard University. He is the author of, among other distinguished works, *Parmigiano: His Works in Painting, Painting in the High Renaissance in Rome and Florence,* and *Circa 1600: A Revolution of Style in Italian Painting.* His essay is adapted from his address to the Art Dealers Association of America on receiving its Outstanding Achievement in Art History Award at the Guggenheim Museum in May.

James Gardner writes criticism for *Commentary* and *Art News.*

Eric Gibson reviews current exhibitions for *The New Criterion.*

Creighton Gilbert is Editor-in-Chief of *The Art Bulletin.*

Roger Kimball has written for *The New York Times Book Review* and *Architectural Record.*

Brad Leithauser is the author of *Hundreds of Fireflies,* a book of poems, and *Equal Distance,* a novel.

Jed Perl has written for *Art in America, Aperture,* and *Arts Magazine.*

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The Whitney's new Graves

by Hilton Kramer

In the life of certain art institutions there sometimes comes a moment—call it the moment of truth—when, as the result of a particularly fateful and disastrous decision about their future course, they stand revealed as the unmistakable enemy of all the standards and traditions and achievements they have claimed to represent. Policies and programs which, prior to this revelatory moment, might be regarded as merely misguided or inadvertent or simply ignorant, suddenly acquire a more sinister and menacing character when their full implication is made so baldly apparent to us. It is only then that we come to understand that these institutions may now constitute a real threat to the life of art and its place in our society.

For many people concerned with the life of art in this country, the program of the Whitney Museum of American Art has now come to constitute a portent of this kind. Much has lately been happening to the Whitney to raise grave doubts about the museum's ability to perform its designated functions. It was a bad sign, for example, when Gail Levin left the Whitney's curatorial staff last year, for Miss Levin was one of the very few bona fide scholars in the field of early twentieth-century American art on the museum staff, and as far as we know, she has never been replaced by a scholar of comparable credentials. Then, too, there was the matter of the museum's unseemly actions—and inactions—on the Morgan Russell donation (about which we shall have more to say in due course). Above all, this year's Biennial exhibition was deeply shocking even to the many museumgoers who, through grim experience, had come to expect the worst from this particular enterprise. Certainly the 1985 Biennial exceeded, in its gleeful surrender to everything that is most vulgar, superficial, and meretricious on the contemporary art scene, anything that had heretofore been seen at the Whitney—and that is really saying something when one considers the recent history of the Biennials.

Yet, distressing as these and certain other developments at the Whitney have been, it was not until May 21, when the museum announced its plans to repackage the Marcel Breuer building it has occupied since 1966 as part of a new and larger museum designed by Michael Graves, that the moment of truth finally dawned even for those who had tried so arduously to make allowances for so many egregious misadventures in the past. With this announcement, the crowded record of foolish decisions could no longer be regarded as a succession of miscellaneous delinquencies. Clearly a new policy was in place, and there was now every indication that we would henceforth be dealing with an institution which cannot be trusted to serve the interests of either art or its public.

While it would not be inaccurate to claim that the new Michael Graves building, which combines an appalling poverty of architectural thought with a maximum of ornamental ostentation, is the perfect symbol of what

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the Whitney now aspires to be, that of course is precisely what makes this whole episode so oppressively significant. Mr. Graves has been nothing if not entirely faithful to the spirit of his client's wishes—a spirit governed by an invincible preference for glitz and specious glamour at the expense of art itself. It is for this reason that the Graves building, though in itself an object lesson in how *not* to design an art museum, cannot be separated from the Whitney program it is intended to serve.

What, then, does this program entail? Alas, there are no mysteries to be decoded in this matter. By its actions, no less than by its pronouncements, the Whitney has made its present and future goals altogether plain. In this respect, its ill-conceived branch-museum program reads like a blueprint for future operations. There are now two of these so-called branch museums already functioning —one in the Philip Morris building at Park Avenue and Forty-second Street in Manhattan, and another in the Champion International building in downtown Stamford, Connecticut. Two more are planned for Manhattan—one in the Equitable tower at Seventh Avenue and Fifty-third Street, scheduled to open this fall, and another at Federal Reserve Plaza, now set for early 1986. No doubt there are still others under discussion.

From the branches already in operation the nature of the Whitney's interest in these misnamed "museum" projects can be easily discerned, and it is not primarily an artistic or museological interest. To a serious experience or understanding of art these branch operations make no contribution whatever. In fact, they aren't in any true sense of the word museums at all and shouldn't be called by that name, but are more akin to boutiques or advertising displays in which token art objects are put on show for the purpose of conferring a spurious "cultural" image on the host companies. The real function of these branch operations is neither to educate nor to delight, but simply to provide both the Whitney and the sponsoring corporations with a mutually beneficial public relations program. The Whitney looks as if it were performing a service for the public, and the sponsoring corporations look as if they were performing a service for art, whereas in truth both are cynically using art *and* the public as a means of promoting their own respective interests.

It is in this historic shift to public relations as a priority interest, to the use of art for the purposes of institutional self-promotion and self-aggrandizement, that the branch-museum program of the Whitney affords a key to its current outlook. Given the goals implicit in that outlook, the building which Michael Graves has designed for the new Whitney is abysmally appropriate, of course. For what the Whitney program calls for isn't so much a new art museum as a new corporate headquarters, and this, more or less, is what Mr. Graves has given it. Unfortunately, for those of us who are still more interested in art than in this transformation of the museum into an arm of the public-relations business, the Graves design is hideously *in*appropriate to the function to which, for the moment anyway, the Whitney still gives lip service: exhibiting works of art. With its sherbert-colored cladding and its cookie-cutter windows, its ornamental cornices and penthouse colonnade, all topped off with one of those preposterous pergolas which serve no other function than to announce to all the world that the whole lugubrious conception is unmistakably Michael Graves's, this design belongs in one of those ballyhoo exhibitions of which the current directorship of the Whitney is so inordinately proud. It was therefore entirely apt that the Graves design should be unveiled to the public while the latest Whitney Biennial was in progress, for it is a design that inflicts on the existing Marcel Breuer building the same kind of degrading transformation which the museum invited one of its favored graffiti artists, Kenny Scharf, to carry out in the building's second-floor washrooms and telephone booths as part of his contribution to this year's Biennial.

The Whitney's blithe disregard for the building which it commissioned from Mar-

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cel Breuer scarcely twenty years ago is in itself a scandal of considerable significance. Among much else, it instantly throws into doubt the Whitney's role—which is, be it remembered, the primary role it claims for itself—in making what its director, Tom Armstrong, calls "initial judgments about the merit of current work." Why should we place any trust in the judgment of a museum that shows itself so eager to repeal the most important architectural decision it ever made and so blind—or is it merely cynical—about the implications of this eagerness?

It is true that the Breuer building has never been an easy building to live with. It makes rather too much of its own authority, and it isn't always as subtle or as commodious in accommodating itself to its functions as it might be. But it was the Whitney, after all, which gave us this high-powered, difficult building in the first place. It was the Whitney which boasted of its merits and made large claims for its excellence. And there is this to be said for the Breuer building: it unequivocably focuses attention on the seriousness of the museological enterprise, it speaks in every detail for the gravity and high purposes of art, and it does not easily lend itself to frivolity or foolishness. Which is why, I suppose, it had to be outrageously defaced to accommodate the spirit of this year's Biennial, and why the current director, with his unerring penchant for the showy and the superficial, is so eager to see it absorbed into Michael Graves's gaudy labyrinth.

We know now what we can expect from the new Whitney. In his remarks to the American Institute of Architects on July 25, Mr. Armstrong announced that in its new building the Whitney would exhibit its art in a new way. What he characterized as the "anonymous spaces" of Sixties museum architecture—meaning, of course, the Breuer building—would no longer do, he said. Which, translated from the public-relations argot used on such occasions, simply means that the Michael Graves design can be counted on to provide the same kind of non-anonymous spaces for the museum's permanent collection that Kenny Scharf and others gave us a glimpse of in this year's Biennial. Which means, in turn, that works of art will henceforth be at the mercy of the art of display at the Whitney, and that the museum will naturally favor the kind of art —of which there is no shortage on today's art scene—which is itself a form of display. No one can say that we weren't warned.

Cognizant that, despite this emphasis on fun and games, the museum must also have at least the appearance of a more serious side, the Whitney has made the claim that its new building will "[enable] the Museum to fulfill its role as a major center for scholarship in American art." For anyone familiar with the museum's record in this matter, the notion of the Whitney serving as "a major center for scholarship in American art" borders on the comical. In this regard, the case of the Morgan Russell donation tells us everything we need to know. Russell was, of course, one of the pioneer figures in the early history of abstract painting. He also happened to enjoy the patronage of Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney, the founder of the museum. Seven years ago Henry M. Reed, who has devoted much time, effort, and expense to assembling an invaluable collection of Russell's manuscripts, studies, and works of art, donated the collection to the Whitney on the understanding that the museum would organize an exhibition of this material and publish a scholarly catalogue. But of course nothing has ever been done with it, and Mr. Reed has now been obliged to go to court in the hope of getting the collection transferred to an institution more receptive to scholarly pursuits. It is farcical for the present administration of the Whitney to claim to have any interest in or understanding of scholarship.

But farce—of one kind or another—seems to be the name of the game that is now being played at the Whitney, which looks and acts more and more like an institution that has severed whatever connections it had with the standards and achievements of high art in order to set itself up as another kind of enterprise.

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Doris Lessing: on the road to "The Good Terrorist"

by Bruce Bawer

In the constellation of post-World War II fiction, Doris Lessing shines with a most peculiar light. To describe her as a novelist and short-story writer (and occasional essayist, playwright, scenarist, and poet) seems, somehow, to be misleading; like Ayn Rand, she is an author many of whose most fervent devotees have been drawn less by the plangency of her prose or the charm of her characters than by the unabashed fervor with which she has polemicized on behalf of an idea. Precisely what that idea is, however, has been a subject of widespread misconception since the publication in 1950 of her first novel, *The Grass is Singing* (the story of a white African woman's murder by a black houseboy), and particularly since the appearance of her sixth and most celebrated novel, *The Golden Notebook,* in 1962. That, of course, was the book that made Lessing a popular prophet: liberation-minded women on both sides of the Atlantic clutched it to their bosoms, proclaimed it their Bible, declared Lessing their Voice. To their minds, her message was, unmistakably, that in the Western world it's hard to be a woman—however gifted, however loved, however privileged. Though Lessing, a strong feminist, sympathized with these women, she disapproved of their reading of her magnum opus. *The Golden Notebook,* she complained in a 1971 introduction to a new edition of the novel, is not "a tract about the sex war." Broadly speaking, this is true; for what most of her eighteen novels have really been about, *The Golden Notebook* included, is Lessing's lifelong desire for "freedom" from bourgeois conformity. It is a desire that has caused her to walk many of the social, political, and mystical paths less travelled by in contemporary Western society, and that has occasioned behavior (much of it described self-flatteringly in her work) which, all too often, can only be characterized as egocentric to the point of irresponsibility. The appearance of a new Lessing novel, *The Good Terrorist*[1]—which, with its two immediate predecessors, seems to indicate a shift away from the programmatic intransigence of her earlier years—provides an excellent opportunity to examine this much celebrated but widely misunderstood novelistic career.

Doris Lessing's rebellion against middle-class values began in her early youth. Born Doris May Tayler in 1919 in the Persian city of Kermanshah, and raised mostly in British-controlled Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe), she was, even in her childhood, a rebel in search of a cause. She did not, however, want for anything to rebel against: from the start, her chief antagonist was her mother, Emily Tayler, whose modest middle-class ambitions—primarily, to maintain a civilized English-style household on the African veld, and to provide her children with a good education—earned her Doris's

1 *The Good Terrorist,* by Doris Lessing; Knopf, 333 pages, $16.95.

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resentment. In fact, as Lessing herself has admitted, it was mainly as a reaction against her conventionally minded mother that Doris, at the age of fourteen, dropped out of the Girls' High School in Salisbury, never to return. Thenceforth she took the autodidactic route, reading haphazardly—if industriously—in the classics. To this day she considers her decision to leave school a sound one. "I am grateful for a lucky escape," she has written. Though she has registered some reasonable complaints about the conventional education with which the Rhodesian authorities attempted to provide her, it is clear that Lessing's principal objection to that education, then and now, is simply that it was, indeed, conventional, and therefore by definition an encroachment upon her right to self-fulfillment. Even at fourteen, then, Lessing was an adversary of conformity of any sort, whose single article of faith was that Mother and Western civilization were in league to prevent her from finding herself.

In this connection, the first four novels of Lessing's *Children of Violence* series are especially revealing. They comprise a slightly fictionalized record of her life in Africa, from her teens to age thirty, with emphasis upon her unmoderated self-regard. Lessing appears (with characteristic lack of subtlety) as "Martha Quest," who, in the eponymous first volume of the series (1952), spends her days enjoying the beauty of the African veld and her nights partying with the smart upper-middle-class younger crowd, dreaming all the while of being freed from her torment. What torment? Why, the torment of living in a century that is dominated by violence, in an outpost of Empire ("Zambesia") that is ruled by racism, in a superficial society that forces a serious, sensitive Martha to present herself as a frivolous, fun-loving "Matty." Never mind that she is herself white, privileged, thousands of miles from the battle lines; Martha is the kind of girl who sits in her backyard, sipping a cool drink and reading about atrocities a continent and a half away, and whines, "Oh, dear, why does this have to happen to *me*?" How she suffers! Going out with a beau, she is thrilled at being "set free" from "her parents who destroyed her." She dreams of someone handing her a hundred pounds and saying, "'Here, Martha Quest, you deserve this, this is to set you free.'" It's awfully funny—and the funniest thing of all is that Lessing doesn't find it funny. Unlike many another self-adoring novelist, she has absolutely no sense of humor about herself, or about protagonists who are her near-perfect reflections. On this score, she puts even Philip Roth in the shade; for some part of Roth, at least, is always aware of his egomania, and laughs at it, as if to say: "I know I'm obnoxious, but I can't help it." Not so Lessing. The saga of Martha Quest is, to her mind, an utterly serious affair; Martha is nothing less than a prisoner of Western ways and means, shaking the bars of her cage, yearning to breathe free.

What makes Martha's puerile rebelliousness easier for Lessing to pass off as sympathetic, even admirable, is that Martha's mother (like Lessing's own) is a racist—an ignorant woman, in the manner of most Rhodesian whites of her time, who sees blacks and Jews as inferior. This gives Martha (as it did Doris) the opportunity to engage in symbolic, seemingly principled, acts of defiance: for example, she dates a Jewish man in whom she has absolutely no romantic interest, and with whom she would otherwise never have associated. Lessing recognizes that this act is patronizing and self-serving, that Martha is taking advantage of the man in order to slap her mother in the face; but this doesn't bother her. To her mind, Martha is manifestly a beacon of moral commitment: something which, as Lessing portrays it, is characterized neither by acute crises of conscience nor by brave and challenging acts of self-abnegation, but, on the contrary, by a "driving individualism"—than which, we are to understand, there is hardly anything more wonderful.

In *A Proper Marriage* (1954), Martha seeks freedom by marrying one Douglas Knowell. (In real life, his name was Frank

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Charles Wisdom.) Since her "first fierce tenet in life" is "hatred for the tyranny of the family" (she's a student of Engels's *Origin of the Family*), her intention is to have not a traditional marriage, in which the partners are chained to one another, but a union that is "sensible," unsullied by belief "in jealousy or even fidelity." (*Sensible,* interestingly, is also the word used by the heroine of Lessing's most famous story, "To Room Nineteen," to describe the marriage that will eventually drive her mad.) To Lessing's way of thinking, this sort of progressive marriage is a good idea in theory, but it just doesn't work—because jealousies *do* arise, babies get born, and next thing you know you're stuck in a tyrannical bourgeois marriage. This, at least, is what happens to Martha. After a brief shining moment of freedom she is incarcerated by the most vicious of all jailers: pregnancy (described in "To Room Nineteen" as a period of "cold storage"). She has a daughter, Caroline, and switches as soon as possible from breast- to bottle-feeding in order to be "free again." But she's not free for long. Bringing up Caroline, she is "sucked into the [domestic] pattern"; three years after the child's birth, she recognizes that "her female self [is] sharply demanding that she should start the cycle of life again," and knows that if she had another baby, "she would be committed to staying here; she would live in the pattern till she died." There's only one thing to do, and she does it: she deserts Douglas and Caroline (as Lessing, at age twenty-four, left Frank Wisdom, who retained custody of their two children, John and Jean). "You'll be perfectly free, Caroline," Martha tells her baby. "I'm setting you free"—meaning that her refusal to stay with her family and play Mummy will keep Caroline from despising her the way Martha despises *her* mother.

For all this lack of responsibility, these first two volumes of *Children of Violence* are among Lessing's least didactic books—and are, in parts, even charming. Like *The Grass is Singing* and those of her early stories that are set in Africa—and that have been collected in such volumes as *This Was the Old Chief's Country* (1951), *The Habit of Loving* (1957), and *African Stories* (1964)—these novels are admirable above all for their exquisite and loving evocation of the veld. Also, though Martha's tireless self-absorption is usually a bit much on the nerves, many of the supporting players, such as Martha's suave but sexless boyfriend Donovan, are affectingly drawn. (What makes this achievement all the more remarkable is that, most of the time, Lessing clearly has quite the opposite effect in mind—that is, we are supposed to be touched to the core by her unruly heroine, and irritated by these conventional dullards who stand in the way of her independence.) At times we even feel for Martha; in *A Proper Marriage,* for example, the description of her pregnancy and confinement, and of her mixed reactions to childbirth, is so rich, natural, and unforced that one cannot help but be moved.

The third and fourth volumes of the series, however, are rather less human and much drearier. Martha's "driving individualism" has led her, in *A Proper Marriage,* to the same place it led Lessing in 1942—namely, into local Communist politics. Consequently, *A Ripple from the Storm* (1958) and *Landlocked* (1965) are more or less obsessed with Martha's adventures in a cabal of Zambesian comrades, where she learns how to express her hatred for convention and her passion for personhood in numbingly conventional and impersonal Marxist rhetoric (which, at times, disfigures our narrator's prose as well—something a traveller through Lessingland had better get accustomed to fast). She marries a German named Anton Hesse (in real life: Gottfried Anton Lessing) who seems, at first, to be a perfect Communist, above those petty personal attachments and jealousies that shackle the middle-class mind. But he eventually disappoints her, for beneath that Marxian mind beats a bourgeois heart. Disenchanted with both Anton and the whole idea of organized radical activism (it's hard to be an individual when you have to go to meetings all the time), Martha once again jumps ship—leaving husband, comrades, and Africa (as Lessing

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did in 1949 with her two-year-old son, Peter Lessing), for England. What she's "learned" is summed up by critic Mona Knapp: "individuality cannot thrive in the ritualistic affiliation with society's institutions and counterinstitutions." And individuality is, without a doubt, the bottom line with Lessing. This is why she does not consider Martha's Communist adventure, however politically unproductive she may recognize it to be, to have been a waste of time. For to Lessing's way of thinking, whether Martha's leftist activities actually have had an influence upon the way people in her nation live—and whether that influence has been positive or negative—hardly matters; what is important is whether Marxism has been a "useful experience" for Martha, personal-growth-wise. And that it has been.

Like *Landlocked, The Golden Notebook* is a leaving-the-comrades story. Whereas the former novel is based upon Lessing's Marxist activities in Southern Rhodesia during the Forties, the latter derives from her involvement with the British Communist Party in the Fifties. Structurally, it is more complex than the four early *Children of Violence* books. Its principal component is a novel-within-a-novel called "Free Women," set in 1957, in which Lessing presents herself as Anna Wulf, a middle-aged London novelist in crisis, who, though buoyed by her friendship with an actress and socialist named Molly, has been failed by her men (they keep going back to their wives), by her Muse (she's suffering from writer's block), by her ten-year-old daughter Janet (who's decided that Mummy's beloved world of "disorder [and] experiment" is not for her), and, most important of all, by her politics (she's a disenchanted member of the Soviet-dominated British Communist Party, which refuses to admit the truth about Stalin or to protest the recent invasion of Hungary). The novel covers a period of several months during which Anna—to whom life without the ideals represented by the Communist Party, and the hopes symbolized by Stalin, seems frighteningly chaotic and meaningless—deconstructs herself, as she has been doing for several years now, in four notebooks containing memoirs, notes, clippings, journals. The black notebook (much of which rehearses the materials of *Children of Violence*) relates to her early years in Africa and to the publication of her novel of Africa, *Frontiers of War*; the red one pertains to her life as a Communist; the blue one records current news events and romances; and the yellow one contains a novel in progress entitled *The Shadow of the Third*, whose protagonist, Ella, shares Anna's preoccupations and (with, we are to understand, only slight variations) lives out a romance Anna had a couple of years earlier. (And, in turn, writes her *own* novel.) If in "Free Women" we read about Anna's troubled present, the notebooks, printed between the sections of "Free Women," give us glimpses, from different angles, of its roots in her political, sexual, and literary past; and then, in a fifth gold-colored notebook, we watch her crack up, put herself together with the help of a schizophrenic American named Saul Green, resign from the Party (as Lessing herself did in that year), and march, head high, alone—but with a sense of her spiritual interconnectedness with all living things—into the future.

Though many critics have complained justifiably that there is less purpose to *The Golden Notebook*'s complex construction than Lessing would have us believe, the structure is largely responsible for this novel's being a good deal more interesting than most of her longer fiction. For once, rather than merely talking about herself, Lessing shows us what it is like to talk about herself, tries to suggest why she is so preoccupied with talking about herself. In short, though it is unarguably a tour de force of narcissism, of mirror-gazing (for Anna is obviously a reflection of Lessing, and Ella, in turn, a reflection of Anna), *The Golden Notebook* is also an apologia of sorts for her entire oeuvre; and it is—as so many contemporary novels try to be—a novel about the making of fictions and the nature of fictional truth.

Yet *The Golden Notebook* is infuriating. For

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Anna's life, like Martha Quest's, centers upon her need to be "free" from bourgeois conformity. If the conflict at the heart of the novel is her crisis over whether to leave the Party, it is because Communism is at the heart of her self-image as a "free woman." Having joined the Party in 1950 because she was disgusted with the "prissy, maiden-auntish" London literary world and was impressed by the Party's "atmosphere of friendliness, of people working for a common goal," she is clearly in the habit of looking upon her Party affiliation less as a serious commitment to an international movement—a movement, moreover, whose actions are liable to have deadly serious consequences—than as a means of rebelling against the sort of people Lessing refers to elsewhere as "the conforming, the average, the obedient." In a typical encounter, Anna reveals her Communism to a conforming, average, and obedient American woman because "I wanted to shock her," and the woman reacts according to plan, sputtering that Anna doesn't strike her as the Red type; a disgusted Anna confides to a notebook: "Better to be a communist, and at almost any cost, better to be in touch than to be so cut off from any reality that one can make a remark as stupid as that." The rationale here is fascinating; it's 1957, Anna is still a Soviet hireling, and we're supposed to see her as being "in touch"!

It's very offensive. For Anna *knows* what the Soviets are guilty of. But she prefers to wrap those troubles in dreams—to escape into the simplistic illusion that, gulags or no gulags, Communism is synonymous with "a dedicated faith in humanity," a "belie[f] in something," and may yet prove to be the great hope of mankind. She knows that to leave the Party would be to leave behind "murder, cynicism, horror, betrayal," but, as a friend tells her—and we are obviously supposed to love her for this—she remains in the fold because she is "full of faith." Indeed, she's a regular Marxist Joan of Arc. "Although I am quite prepared to believe that he [Stalin] is mad and a murderer," reads a characteristic notebook entry of the early Fifties, "I like to hear people use that tone of simple, friendly respect for him. Because if that tone were to be thrown aside, something very important would go with it, paradoxically enough, a faith in the possibility of democracy, of decency. A dream would be dead—for our time, at least." Yes, a misplaced faith, and a misbegotten dream, without which we would all be a good deal better off. Anna's is a politics of idealism in the worst sense of the word; and we are supposed to admire her for it.

Even when Anna does leave the Communist Party, she is hardly contrite about her years of working against the best interests of Western freedoms, in favor of a murderous tyranny. After all, her admission that the Soviet Union is indeed little better than a concentration camp and that Britain is "safe, comfortable, prosperous" should, by rights, go hand-in-hand with an acknowledgment that her whole political career has been foolish and irresponsible. But Anna doesn't see things in this way, and neither does Lessing. At the end of the novel she wants us to perceive Anna in the same way that Anna perceives Anna: as a Sisyphean "boulder-pusher" on the mountain of "human stupidity," a selfless lifelong worker toward that great day "when the world [will be] full of people who don't hate and fear and murder." This is, of course, major-league self-delusion. What makes it particularly difficult to tolerate is that, long after her departure from the Communist Party, Lessing continued to speak and write as if the greatest villain of the Fifties was not Stalin but McCarthy, and to endorse radical activism as a means of achieving "freedom" from dull conformity. In a 1970 interview, for instance, when asked about campus riots, she declared that "in the 1960s the youth have had a great deal of freedom. It has been a wonderful moment in history." Predictably, as in *Children of Violence,* this infatuation with irresponsibility is the bottom line in *The Golden Notebook.* To Lessing, once again, what ultimately matters about our heroine's Communist adventure is not whether it has served mankind well or ill, but whether it

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has benefited our heroine's personal development. And, bless her, it has. "I was a communist," Anna says near the end of the novel. "On the whole, a mistake. A useful experience though, and one can never have too many of those."

Nor, to Anna's mind, can one have too many men. Since she is, as she sees it, "a completely new type of woman," wisely wary of liaisons that might lead to formal commitments ("Neither of us," as Anna boasts to her similarly disposed friend Molly, "were [sic] prepared to get married simply to give our children fathers"), she generally confines herself to brief encounters with married men—some of them out-of-town businessmen, some of them casual acquaintances. She is attracted to what she calls "*real men*" (and the term means to her exactly what it does to the author of *Real Men Don't Eat Quiche*) and, in particular, to the cruel, bellicose, and mentally disturbed. She likes tension, craziness, sees madness as a sign of adventurous individualism ("People stay sane by blocking off, by limiting themselves"). Saul Green (under whose alternately loving and malicious eye she breaks down and puts herself back together) is schizophrenic, at times "a madman full of hate." She finds this aphrodisiacal, as she does the sexual partner who comes right out and says: "I enjoy a society where women are second-class citizens, I enjoy being boss and being flattered." Her response: "Good . . . . Because in a society where not one man in ten thousand begins to understand the ways in which women are second-class citizens, we have to rely for company on the men who are at least not hypocrites."

Anna's got it all figured out. But when the evening's over, she can't understand it: why was it so unfulfilling? Why are men (for she feels free to generalize about the entire sex on the basis of these specimens) so obtuse, possessive, vain, impersonal, insulting? Why are they so uninterested in or unaware of how to please a woman in bed? Why are they so quick to be on their way in the morning? Why, just when she starts to get attached, do they cheat on her, make her jealous, undermine her hard-won freedom? And why do they keep saying that she's "castrating"? (This is a sore point with Lessing, who complains in her introduction that most "women are . . . cowards" who "will run like little dogs with stones thrown at them when a man says: You are unfeminine, aggressive, you are unmanning me. It is my belief that any woman who marries or takes seriously in any way at all a man who uses this threat, deserves everything she gets. For such a man is a bully . . . . ignorant . . . a coward.") Anna could, of course, try to find herself a "good man," but she doesn't want one. In her notebooks, she quotes a book reviewer's observation that "women, even the nicest of them, tend to fall in love with men quite unworthy of them." "This review, of course," notes Anna, "[was] written by a man. The truth is that when 'nice women' fall in love with 'unworthy men' it is always either because these men have 'named' them, or because they have an ambiguous uncreated quality impossible to the 'good' or 'nice' men. The normal, the good men, are finished and completed and without potentialities."

Lessing-Anna-Ella's attitude toward the enslaving sex, then, is much the same as her attitude toward governments: the dangerous, mysterious ones, the ones with "potentialities," exert an insuperable attraction upon her, and the "good" ones she despises. Perhaps the most telling male-female relationship in the book, in this respect, is that between Anna and her young homosexual boarder, Ivor. He is probably the only good man in all of *The Golden Notebook,* but Anna has only contempt for him because, in her eyes, "he's not a man." Why? Because "with 'a real man' there would be a whole area of tension, of wry understanding that there can't be with Ivor; there would be a whole dimension there isn't now . . . ." If a real man shared her flat, her daughter Janet (who loves Ivor) "would resent him, would have to accept him, have to come to terms." There would be *tension,* and Anna—who loves tension, whose whole life is an exercise in the creation of tension between herself

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and her environment—wants it for her daughter too. Thinking this through, Anna hears Ivor reading Janet a story about a girls' school, his voice (Anna decides) tinged with a tyrannical male mockery that is "aimed at the world of the girls' school, at the feminine world." "Well, my poor girl," she muses, "you'd better get used to it early, because you're going to have to live in a world full of it." What a switch! One minute Anna is full of contempt for Ivor as a less-than-real man, not intimidating enough for her; the next minute he is a supermale tyrant. It's inane. And Lessing doesn't realize it; she just doesn't see it. Nor does she intend any irony when, in the next paragraph, Anna worries that Ivor and his boyfriend will "corrupt" Janet, but concludes that "my influence, the healthy female influence, is strong enough to outweigh theirs" —the "healthy influence," of course, being that of a middle-aged adventuress who keeps bringing loosely wrapped men in off the street to spend the night.

Anna's breakdown is occasioned by her disenchantment with the Communist Party. Could it be that the rampantness of mental disturbance in the novels that follow *The Golden Notebook* is, similarly, due to the loss of Soviet Communism as a foundation for Lessing's rebellious self-image? The more one reads these later novels, the more one is persuaded that, with the Communist Party and the idea of Stalin no longer available as a means of justifying her systematic intractability to herself and to the world, Lessing was at sea. Without a *Weltanschauung* handy, the world was, for her, suddenly bereft of logic, plunged into chaos. This seems to be the *raison d'être,* in any case, of *The Four-Gated City* (1969), the fifth and last novel in *Children of Violence.* This book—more dense, dark, and chattily capacious than its predecessors—is more a symbolic than a realistic representation of Lessing's own life. It follows Martha Quest through twenty dull years in a gray, Kafkaesque London, during which she lives with and keeps house for a well-to-do family of Communists, Labourites, neurotics, kleptomaniacs, and a psychotic named Lynda. The supporting cast carries on at length about McCarthyism, the Korean War, the Atomic Bomb, and other preoccupations familiar to readers of *The Golden Notebook,* and our narrator describes with admiration such events as a Knightsbridge rally of anarchists, Communists, and pacificists, whom she praises as the "small . . . number" on whom "depend[s] the belief in saying no." Martha herself keeps a low political profile, of course, having lost her faith in the efficacy of organized radicalism way back in *Landlocked.* But she finds something wonderful to take its place: madness. Observing Lynda, she comes to recognize, à la R. D. Laing, that the insane are not really insane; it's our *society* that's insane, and therefore the insane are the sanest of us all. Perhaps, then, madness is the road to truth? *Eureka!* Before we know it, Martha is hearing voices, breaking down, foreseeing the future. (*Anything* to avoid being conventional!) And then, in 1968 or thereabouts, a nuclear holocaust takes place, and in the brief epistolary "appendix," we are suddenly in the realm of apocalyptic fiction. We learn that in the months preceding the holocaust, the already fascistically inclined governments of Britain and the United States clamped down on freedom; in Britain, "order, self-discipline, formal religion, conformity, authority" were the rule, while America experienced a "new age of 'piety and iron'" during which Dr. Spock was "sentenced for unconformity." This "bland, insular conformity" soon gave way to violence, social collapse, and, ultimately, nuclear nightmare—after which radiation-mutated children began to develop telepathic and visionary powers, leading to hopes of a humbled, less authoritarian world united by extrasensory perception, where a psychotic like Lynda is no longer regarded as a psychotic but, in Martha's words, is valued as "a first-class 'listener,' a first-class 'seer.'" In the future, according to Lessing, it is upon such hopes of better living through psychochemistry, as it were, that the fate of mankind precariously rests.

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The strange and marvelous powers of the human mind, the fecundity of madness: *Briefing for a Descent into Hell* (1971), which reads like the swiftly churned-out record of a narcotics trip, picks up these themes and contemplates them obsessively. Charles Watkins, the first male protagonist in a Lessing novel, loses his mind on the gray, dreary streets of London—or, rather, finds it; for, asleep for weeks on end in his hospital bed, he journeys through a beautiful dream world where he experiences "the mind of humanity . . . not at all to be separated from the animal mind which married and fused with it everywhere"; he "watche[s] a pulsing swirl of all being, continually changing, moving, dancing, a controlled impelled lava"; he finds the "strand of humanity [to be] part of the shimmering web of fluid joyful being." And so forth. Such pseudo-poetry forms the bulk of this novel. "Humanity," we learn, is "a pulse in the light of the sun," part of a "Cosmic Harmony," in which "individuals [do] not matter, because an individual [can] only be important insofar as he or she [is] a pledge for the future . . . ." This is not to suggest that Lessing has parted from her raging egoism; on the contrary, she's merely taken it one step further, to the cosmic level, like Whitman or Ginsberg. She's become a seer, a container of multitudes, a visionary.

If this sounds like Eastern mysticism at its dippiest, it is because *Briefing for a Descent into Hell,* like *Landlocked* and *The Four-Gated City* before it, was written under the influence of Sufism, a form of Islamic mysticism of which Lessing first became aware when she reviewed Idries Shah's book *The Sufis* in 1964. Suggestive at times of neo-Platonism, Transcendentalism, and Jungian psychology, the Sufist philosophy is based largely upon the doctrine of "Oneness of Being," which (according to *What is Sufism?* by Martin Lings) "means that what the eye sees and the mind records is an illusion, and that every apparently separate and finite thing is in Truth the Presence of the One Infinite." The physical world is nothing; spirit and mind are all:

> the primordial soul is a unified multiple harmony suspended as it were between the next world and this world, that is, between the Inward and the Outward, in such a way that there is a perfect balance between the pull of the inward signs—the Heart and beyond it the Spirit—and the *signs on the horizons* . . . . But in the fallen soul, where the attraction of the Heart is more or less imperceptible, the balance is broken and the scales are heavily weighted in favour of the outer world.
>
> To ask how the true balance can be restored is one way of asking "What is Sufism?" And the first part of the answer is that an inward movement must be set up in the soul to counteract the pull of the outer world so that the lost harmony can be regained.

It is not surprising that Lessing's most significant ideological act, after leaving the Communist Party, was not to move toward a more moderate and sensible political position, but rather to throw herself into a non-political ideology that was equally immoderate. It is, furthermore, clear why Lessing found the doctrines of Sufism, in particular, so alluring. Here, after all, was a system of thought which, like Communism, offered her an established means of being an anti-establishment Utopian idealist—and yet which was decidedly *not* a form of organized religion or politics. On the contrary, it was, with its emphasis upon inner truth, the perfect ideology for an individualist. Sufism spoke in terms of universes, but the self was always at the center; it thus represented a magnificent perspective from which to envision (in *The Four-Gated City* and later in *Memoirs of a Survivor*) the disintegration of civilization as a reflection of her own confusion and mental collapse. Sufism also was ideally suited for an ex-Communist Party type like herself, for it explained exactly what was wrong with her. The years as a Party functionary had thrown her off balance: her scales had been too heavily weighted in favor of the outer world. The solution was to restore true balance, to set up an "inward movement." This is the guiding idea in *Briefing,* which features, in place

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of an epigraph, the words "CATEGORY: INNER-SPACE FICTION/*For there is never anywhere to go but in.*" Lessing has loaded her dice here: Watkins is a supremely earthbound professor of classics, a veritable symbol of classicism, order, tradition—everything Lessing despises. His madness is, of course, a reaction to his classically ordered life—a healthy reaction, we are supposed to feel, which puts him in touch with his true, abundant inner self. We are expected to resent his dull, faceless doctors (whom Lessing identifies only as X and Y) for referring to his dream world as "religious delusions" and for, at the end, curing him and returning him to his waking life, to his family and career, the memory of the dream world erased forever.

Like *Briefing, Memoirs of a Survivor* (1975) is an exercise in mystical monomania; like the "appendix" of *The Four-Gated City,* it is the story of life in a primitive, chaotic world of the near future in which—at first, anyway—people "[live] on, adjusting our lives as if nothing fundamental [is] happening." In a grim pseudo-London, the absence of order is at first a nuisance for our Lessing-like protagonist but eventually gives way to a Sufistic vision in which the young man, girl, and dog with whom she has spent these dark days are led away by a mysterious, beautiful she-figure—"the one person I had been looking for all this time." The book ends as follows (the ellipsis is Lessing's):

> Both [the girl and dog] walked quickly behind that One who went ahead showing them the way out of this collapsed little world into another order of world altogether. Both, just for an instant, turned their faces as they passed that other threshold. They smiled . . . . Seeing those faces, [the young man] was drawn after them, but still he hesitated in a fearful conflict, looking back and around, while the brilliant fragments whirled around him. And then, at the very last moment, they came, his children came running, clinging to his hands and his clothes, and they all followed quickly on after the others as the last walls dissolved.

Memoirs was, so to speak, only prologue. In 1979 Lessing began publishing her infamous science-fiction series entitled *Canopus in Argos: Archives,* an apparent attempt at some sort of postmodern Pentateuch. The novels followed one another rapidly; the first, *Shikasta. Re: Colonised Planet 5,* was soon joined by *The Marriage Between Zones Three, Four, and Five. As Narrated by the Chroniclers of Zone Three* (1980), *The Sirian Experiments. The Report by Ambien II, of the Five* (1981); *The Making of the Representative for Planet 8* (1982); and *Documents Relating to the Sentimental Agents in the Volyen Empire* (1983). The novels are, alas, as graceless and clotted as their titles. In presenting them as a series of documents, Lessing was only demonstrating an interest in unorthodox forms that she had exhibited earlier, in the notebooks of *The Golden Notebook* and the correspondence-filled "appendix" of *The Four-Gated City*; it is difficult not to see this predilection as the result of Lessing's growing impatience with both the traditional form of the novel and its stylistic requirements. Lessing had, after all, never been celebrated as a stylist, and to open a volume of the *Canopus* series at random is to be convinced that she had at last grown tired of sifting her increasingly intense and recondite vision through the mesh of art—had, in other words, left the necessity of fine-tuning her prose, the responsibility for finding *le mot juste,* and most of the other requisites of the literary art far behind her.

She did not, unfortunately, leave behind a single one of her familiar themes, doctrines, and type-scenes; they are all here, jumbled together in a febrile galactic mishmash. As in *The Golden Notebook,* there are diatribes against the United States as the warmonger and capitalistic raper of continents, the greatest evil on Earth (which is known here as the planet Shikasta); as in *The Four-Gated City,* there is a nuclear holocaust in the near future, after which the hope is that life can be good again, thanks to the primitive pleasures of some pseudo-Sufistic entity known as SOWF (Substance-of-We-Feeling). As in *Children of Violence,* there is racial tension in

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Africa and the "lesson" that both institutions and counterinstitutions are worthless. There are humans and aliens, and lives that last hundreds of years. At the center of it all is a vision of a Utopian universe governed by the Sufist idea of collective consciousness, the sharing of a single mind and soul by all living beings; though Lessing clearly believes that Sufism has taught her the foolishness of self-centeredness, she just as clearly has made use of that philosophy, in these books, to build her self-fascination into an egomania of galactic proportions. The following excerpts from a speech by a character named Doeg in *The Making of the Representative* offer a fair representation of this pseudo-holistic egomania at work:

> I remember how the thought came into me that I, Doeg, was in the shape I am, with the features I have, because of a choice among multitudes. I set in front of myself a mirror, and I looked at my features . . . . I imagined . . . slight modifications of me, some very similar indeed, some hardly at all. I filled a town with these variations of myself, then a city, then, in my mind, whole landscapes. Doeg, Doeg, Doeg again . . . . I said to them: Look, here you are, in me . . . for the feeling of me, of I, that feeling *I am here, Doeg,* would have been your feeling had the chances of the genes fallen differently, and if you, your particular shape and mould, had been born instead of me. What was born, then, to those repositories of a million years of the dicing of the genes, was a *feeling,* a consciousness, was the self-awareness: *here I am.* And this awareness was given the name Doeg—though I have used many names in my life . . . . it is true, it must be true, that this precious thing, what I hold on to when I say: *I am here, Doeg,* this is the feeling I am, and have, and what I recognise in sleep, and will recognise as myself when I die, leaving all this behind . . . all that there is of this little feeling, *here I am,* the feeling of *me*—and yet it is not mine at all, but is shared, it must be, for how can it be possible that there are as many shades and degrees of me-ness as there are individuals on this planet of ours? [Two pages later:] . . . my loneliness is softened when I reflect that in saying *I, here I am, here is what I am,* this feeling or sensation or taste of *me*—I speak for . . . but I do not know how many. For others, that is certain. In that feeling of me-ness is, must be, a sharing, must be a companionship. I shall never wake from the deep sleep . . . without thinking . . . *Here I am, here is the consciousness of me,* of those others, who are I, are myself, though I do not know who they are, nor they me . . . .

And so on, through the millennia.

The last thing one might have expected, after these ponderous cosmic excursions, was that Lessing would come gently down to earth and proceed to write a pair of novels whose taut structure, restrained prose, relative indifference to ideology, and penetrating attention to human character would cause her to be compared with Barbara Pym. But that (for reasons which I shall discuss presently) was precisely what happened. The two novels were *The Diary of a Good Neighbour* (1983) and *If the Old Could . . .* (1984). Reading these graceful and touching books, one could not help feeling that, in the bizarre *Canopus* series, Lessing had been deliberately purging her soul, not only of the last tattered vestiges of Communism and Sufism but of the egocentric rebelliousness that had drawn her to them in the first place.

In these novels, both written in diary form, Lessing was born again as Jane ("Janna") Somers, who, at the beginning of the first novel, is a stylish, fiftyish London women's-magazine editor with no children and no strong personal attachments or obligations, even to her husband Freddie; she is a woman who "likes the freedom of being alone in a crowd. I like being alone. Period." Her sister Georgie (who lives in "exactly the house my parents lived in always . . . . country-suburban, comfortable, conventional, conservative") considers Janna "the irresponsible one" in the family, guilty of "selfish childlessness," and has nothing but contempt for her "glamorous goings-on." When Freddie becomes ill, Janna thinks it "unfair to me"; when

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he dies, she takes in her mother, who has been living for years with Georgie's family, and whom Janna has "always found embarrassing . . . . When I was out with her I used to think, no one would believe I could be her daughter, two worlds, heavy suburban respectable—and me." After a year, though, her mother develops cancer, and since Janna cannot face the necessity of making prolonged visits to the hospital, Georgie does it instead. We learn that, years earlier, Janna behaved even more abominably during her grandmother's last illness: "I simply behaved as if Granny being ill had nothing to do with me. Not my affair!"

But soon after her mother dies, everything changes. Janna meets a poor, lonely, cantankerous old working-class woman named Maudie Fowler, and finds herself gradually becoming Maudie's best friend, her daily companion and helpmeet. Now Janna is able to see herself plain. She tells Georgie: "It has only recently occurred to me that I never lifted a finger all the time Granny was dying." She realizes that she misses having talked to Granny, to Mother, to Freddie. Why didn't she talk to them when they were alive? She knows the answer immediately: "I didn't want to, that is the answer. *I didn't want to know.*"

It is a breakthrough, a moving one—and the reader who is a veteran of the windy narcissism of Lessing's previous novels (and, particularly, of Martha Quest's rebellion against her conventional mother) cannot help but be especially moved. For suddenly Janna—in whom, despite some significant differences in background, we can see the contours of earlier Lessing heroines—knows what she has been, and wants to change; she *wants* responsibility, wants to care, to be attached, to comprehend (as best she can) what it is like to be someone other than herself. To this end she devotes several pages of her diary to a sensitive description of "Maudie's day" as she imagines it—and later in the novel does the same for other unfortunates whom she has met. To be sure, Janna's interest in Maudie is, at first anyway, unconsciously self-serving; it's a way of appeasing her guilt. But she *does* learn to be responsible, in a quiet, efficient, very English way (these are, I think, the most "English" of Lessing's novels); and the friendship that develops between the two women is precisely, believably evoked and extremely affecting.

Nor does Lessing ruin it all by canonizing Janna for her newfound selflessness or by turning her self-sacrificing heroine into yet another suffering victim of responsibility. Quite the contrary; *The Diary of a Good Neighbour* is a work of conspicuous proportion, in which, at last, a Lessing heroine is not a self-obsessed, offbeat ideologue at war with the white male capitalist hegemony, but a sympathetic, truly believable human being, untainted by fanatical political allegiances or by goofy mystical beliefs, whose unexceptional life is made luminous by her creator's patience, perception, and humor. The reader familiar with Lessing's previous works cannot help but take grateful notice of the scorn with which Janna regards her niece Jill's entanglement with fashionable radicals ("The thing is, poor creatures, they don't know it's their social lives, they really believe it's politics"), her definition of madness as "losing touch with reality," and her use—more than once—of the word "sensible" as a special compliment. Likewise, in *If the Old Could . . .*, an almost equally fine (if more meandering and less moving) achievement which picks our heroine up where we left her and sees her through an affair with a problematic married man, Janna is dismayed when her beloved expresses the desire to avoid "the entrance into responsibility." Among the responsibilities Janna takes on in the latter novel is the care of her troubled niece Kate, who associates with some young revolutionary types living at a "squat"—and for whose "persecuted minority" pose Janna has little patience.

The themes that these two novels share—responsibility, rebellion, sanity, sensibleness—are certainly recognizable from Lessing's previous work; it is the perspective upon them that has changed, changed utterly. In fact, so far removed is all this, in its "sen-

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sible" point of view, from the earlier novels that one cannot help but wonder if both of these books are some sort of joke or charade or *jeu d'esprit* in which Lessing is playing the part of a very different sort of woman from herself simply to see what it would be like to be responsible and selfless. Or, perhaps, do these novels represent yet another utterly solemn attempt to "free" herself—this time, paradoxically enough, from the very strain of rebellious egocentrism that drives her to seek "freedom" in the first place? That, in one way or another, Lessing was indeed trying, in these novels, to free herself from *herself* would seem to be supported by the fact that they were originally published not under Lessing's own name, but under the name of Jane Somers, who was identified as "a well-known woman journalist," her real identity being known to only a few editors. Lessing revealed last year that she was the novels' true author, and the impression given by the newspaper reports was that she had used a pseudonym primarily to demonstrate how badly the work of unknown first novelists fares in Britain and America; but, when the novels were reissued last year in a single paperback volume bearing Lessing's own name and the collective title *The Diaries of Jane Somers,* Lessing added an introduction which made it clear that her real motives were rather more personal. If the Jane Somers novels indeed sound like the work of a novelist with a changed sensibility, this introduction is most definitely the product of the old (humorless, ego-happy, freedom-obsessed) Lessing. She explains how irritating it is to have been pigeonholed by reviewers over the years—who have categorized her, in turn, as a writer about race, Communism, sex, mysticism—and says that, the *Canopus* series having "set [her] free to write in ways [she] had not used before," she "wondered if there would be a similar liberation if I were to write in the first person in a different character . . . . And it did turn out that as Jane Somers I wrote in ways that Doris Lessing cannot . . . . Jane Somers knew nothing about a kind of dryness, like a conscience, that monitors Doris Lessing whatever she writes and in whatever style." "Some," she goes on to suggest, "may think this [*The Diaries*] is a detached way to write about Doris Lessing"; but who is Doris Lessing? Like Doeg in *The Making of the Representative,* she proceeds to discuss the question of identity, and to contemplate the various names she has had in her life. "I sometimes wonder what my real name is; surely I must have one?" Could it be Jane Somers? One influence, she says, upon her conception of Jane Somers was

> reflections about what my mother would be like if she lived now: that practical, efficient, energetic woman, by temperament conservative, a little sentimental, and only with difficulty (and a lot of practice at it) able to understand weakness and failure, though always kind. No, Jane Somers is not my mother, but thoughts of women like my mother did feed Jane Somers.

Thoughts of women like her mother fed the despised May Quest too, of course. One comes away from Lessing's introduction suspecting that the key to the whole Jane Somers phenomenon is that, whether permanently or temporarily, the Lessing of the *Diaries* essentially reversed her position on her mother, and that this change made all the difference—caused selfishness to turn to self-effacement, blind individualism to a firm appreciation of the value of personal attachments and responsibilities.

In *The Good Terrorist,* Lessing's most recent novel, we are no longer in Jane Somers territory. But we have not come all the way back to Lessingland, either. To be sure, our heroine—a thirty-six-year-old Communist named Alice Mellings—has a good deal in common with Martha Quest. Like Martha, she is spoiled, resents her bourgeois mother, belongs to a small-time Marxist organization (the "Communist Centre Union"). But the difference is that Lessing depicts her much the way Jane Somers might do. As the novel opens, Alice is, with her sleazy homosexual friend Jasper, taking up residence in

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a large condemned house (a "squat," as in *If the Old Could . . .*) on the outskirts of London; she proceeds to set it in magnificent order and to fill it with other young radicals, for whom she becomes (as Martha does in *The Four-Gated City*) a happy little cook and housekeeper. She also becomes an enthusiastic participant in her housemates' bizarre visions of the revolution they will lead against British capitalism; and she listens uneasily—not quite able to bring herself to protest—when they plot to explode a bomb at a nearby hotel.

In many ways, this situation is reminiscent of Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent,* wherein a cadre of revolutionaries similarly share a shabby London house, call each other "comrade," endure the watchful attentions of the local police, and plan a terrorist bombing. Lessing's conspirators, like Conrad's, perceive their bombing as a powerful revolutionary statement; but, as in Conrad's novel, any sane person could recognize the planned act of terrorism as purely destructive, with no possible positive ends—in Conrad's words, an "act of madness and despair." The pathetic pointlessness of the enterprise is underscored in *The Good Terrorist,* as in *The Secret Agent,* by the fact that the bomb ends up blowing one of the major characters to bits. In Lessing, as in Conrad, the aim of all this is to probe the "impenetrable mystery" of the revolutionary sensibility—and, more broadly, to examine the human capacity for illogic, moral slovenliness, and destructiveness.

Yet, at heart, Lessing's novel is a world away from Conrad's. If his book is a powerful exploration of certain ambiguities of the human soul, hers is, in the end, a rather contrived and unnecessary demonstration that young English terrorists are likely to be irresponsible, deluded misfits, who act primarily out of jealousy for the stable and happy and well-to-do, and who are all too content to be supported by the society of which they consider themselves enemies. This is, of course, hardly news. But one can see nonetheless why Lessing is so concerned with telling it to us, and why she seems so convinced that she has a strong and controversial point to make: for, though she resigned from the British Communist Party decades ago, it is clear that the Marxist collective still remains a force in her psyche, one that she takes quite seriously, continues to be strongly drawn to, perhaps even feels threatened by. Reading this book, consequently, one is not fascinated (as Lessing wishes one to be) by her portrait of a revolutionary squat, so much as one is irritated that, after all these years, and whatever her attitude toward it, Lessing is still so fascinated by the phenomenon of radical activism. In a way, one senses, this novel is not intended for the lay reader so much as it is the judgment of an "old Red" (as she calls herself elsewhere) upon the pursuits of a corps of much younger Reds. More than anything else, it is a case of Doris Lessing talking to herself—doing her damnedest, that is, to prove something that most of her audience already takes for granted.

At the center of all this is the portrait of Alice—the radical whose greatest joy is keeping house, the self-proclaimed "worker" who was born into the middle classes and has never held a job. As we gradually learn, she (as well as Jasper) has been living with that conventional mother of hers for years, joyfully running the house for her; now her mother has been forced to move into a tiny, run-down flat, and Alice—in the manner of a stubborn, threatened five-year-old—cannot understand it, accept it, or even remember it from one minute to the next. Her mother explains: "I can't afford to live here. I'll have trouble paying my own bills. Do you understand, Alice?" No, she doesn't. How can her mother *do* this to her? Her only recourse is to abuse her mother with Marxist rhetoric: "Don't you see that your world is finished? The day of the rich selfish bourgeoisie is over. You are doomed . . . ." Later she visits her mother's house, finds it empty, and can't figure it out: "Where was her mother . . . ? Did she imagine she could run away from Alice, just like that? Was she mad? Well, she must be, not telling Alice and Jasper . . . . Here somewhere deep in her mind a thought

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began tugging and nagging, that her mother had told her. Well, if so, not in such a way that Alice could take it in." When Alice finally locates her mother's new flat in Hampstead, she is confused by her mother's poverty, and disturbed that her mother is living among working-class women (one of whom Alice, on an earlier reconnaissance of the building, has befriended à la Janna Somers). Alice's mother (who is surprised at Alice's confusion) reminds Alice that she helped sell the house. Alice doesn't remember.

Is she supposed to be insane? Not quite: that would ruin Lessing's point. For it seems that to Lessing's mind, Alice is, as her mother Dorothy complains, simply immature, like other members of her generation. "You've all had it so easy all your lives, you simply do not understand. If you want something, then you take it for granted you can have it . . . . You're all spoiled rotten." As Lessing puts it in the last sentence of the book, Alice is a "poor baby"—a girl who never grew up, a 1980s Martha Quest who stayed too long at the fair. But could emotional immaturity alone account for Alice's extremely bizarre behavior? It seems unlikely. One thing, at any rate, is for certain: whatever the explanation for their behavior, it is impossible, after a certain point, to care about Alice or any of her cohorts, who, even when they do come to life, do so in a very limited way, having little to offer aside from their mindless, megalomaniacal rantings about the need "to put an end to this shitty fucking filthy lying cruel hypocritical system." When the bomb goes off and kills one of them, the reader is supposed to be anguished, enlightened; but one's dominant feeling is regret that the bomb failed to dispatch the whole sick crew.

The characters with whom Lessing patently sympathizes more than any other are Dorothy and her longtime friend Zoë, whom it is possible to see as Anna and Molly of *The Golden Notebook,* thirty years later. Both are ex-radicals, but whereas Zoë has remained left-wing, Dorothy—whom we are clearly intended to recognize as the most intelligent, sensible, and well-adjusted person in the book—has changed her tune. In their single confrontation, Dorothy's position unarguably comes out ahead. "The next thing," says Zoë, "you'll be supporting Reagan's and Thatcher's foreign policies." "I've been wondering whether I shouldn't," Dorothy replies. "After all, forty years ago it wasn't fascist to fight for the bad against the worse. Why is it now?" Is Lessing becoming a Tory? Will this first post-Jane Somers novel initiate a series of conservative tracts in the manner of the later Dos Passos? Perhaps; yet one would guess otherwise. It is, of course, regrettable that Lessing has returned in this novel to the drab little community of radical activism, and that, once again, she is at least as preoccupied with politics as with human character. But one suspects that, after the Jane Somers affair, she may have felt compelled to return to her old Communist stomping ground for one more time—to look it over, as it were, from her new perspective—before proceeding in subsequent novels, to other, less obsessively political matters. Let us hope, at least, that this is the case. For Lessing has demonstrated adroitly that—when freed from the foolish, crippling systems of thought that have been her true jailers for all too many years—she is capable of creating works of fiction that are not only intellectually responsible but stylish, affecting, and truly artful.

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On art history
by S. J. Freedberg

Art history needs no "reason" or "justification" any more than do other historical pursuits. What history studies is the past of humanity out of which, no matter how distant, our own humanity has been generated in an uninterrupted, endless causal chain. In the study of the links that constitute this chain there is not only the explanation of what we have come to be and how, but the opportunity to relive some portions of past time, experiencing them profoundly in the mind and spirit, knowing through the historian's powers of resurrection the events and actors of the past.

"Ordinary" history, made out of that which verbal information can transmit and verbal description recreate of the past, differs in a crucial sense from art history in the nature of the evidence that art history uses. Political events, sociological forms, or the circumstances of an economy have vanished with the people who lived in them, and we can only laboriously reconstruct their approximate configuration from evidence that is usually incomplete and insufficiently explicit. Art history, however, is based upon actual surviving presences from the past—tangible survivals: not mere indications of a form which we must reconstruct, as is the case in music, nor the verbal symbols of a thought or feeling, as in a poem, but the form itself, a physically present body that has endured through history. Contained in that form which we may touch and see is a communication—a content that is the crystallization of the thought and feeling of a being in the past, made immediate and accessible to us. In each work of art, moreover, there is an image not only of its individual creator but of the culture within which he created it: the work of art, of visual art especially, is a permanently arrested moment out of history, like a still photograph made when that history was in process. The work of art may do more than reflect its culture; if it is great enough, it may shape and redirect it. When we consider them in groups or in sequences of time works of art cast light on the nature of history, and on the processes by which causality works. By itself, the work of art can serve as what we may call an ***adequate symbol*** of the history from which it has survived.

Art history has developed a rich and varied set of methods by which to arrive at a comprehension of the meaning of works of art, but all of these must depend at the beginning on certain commonly accepted procedures that are essentially objective in their kind. No matter what our school of art historical practice, there is little argument about the necessity of those procedures or their validity. However, there is one procedure basic to our scholarship that lies uneasily on the outer periphery of objective method and which may verge, in not always controllable measure, into the subjective realm. I refer to the once esteemed discipline of connoisseurship, of which the great practitioners used to enjoy a status like that of a

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high priesthood. Today, connoisseurship is relatively little esteemed, and in the universities it may have a very minor part or none in the art history curriculum. I regret this diminishing emphasis. Faulty and in part subjective as the procedures of connoisseurship may indeed be, its products remain absolutely fundamental to the further, and—if you insist—higher processes of art history. To educate art historians insufficiently in the skills of connoisseurship is equivalent to granting law degrees to persons who have not been taught the rules of evidence.

What I want to defend, however, beyond connoisseurship, are the even more recognizably "subjective" processes of art history. Where connoisseurship has come merely to be neglected, many of the other factors of art historical practice that can be called subjective have come under positive attack. Yet, subjectivity intrudes inescapably at the very beginning step in the historian's confrontation with a work of art as he reads the aesthetic substance of the object and responds to it: by "aesthetic" I mean that which is sensuously apprehensible through the eye of the form of the object and the meaning which that form communicates. This is of course "subjective" because it does not depend, as in a philological process, on terms of measurement or description but on reading of the visible form in terms of its affects and meanings. Where affects and meanings are the art historian's concern, he is by definition working with subjective matter. There is an obviously higher risk in this than in some objective exercise, but it is a law of intellectual as well as financial economics that a higher risk may yield a significantly higher return.

Since the peculiar and essential character of visual art lies in its visually defined aesthetic substance it is *that* meaning which the art historian is explicitly and essentially obliged to seek. This process seems to me not much different in kind from what we do in our ordinary business of living and perhaps not much more difficult: compare our modes of conveying meaning among ourselves, which we achieve through forms, signs, symbols, and modes of movement. For the most part we manage adequately to comprehend one another. We should consider the forms of art a language, one less rigid in its structure and less conventionalized than a language of words, and therefore capable of more nuanced and flexible expression. As our minds can meet now, displaying forms and making signs and symbols to each other, so can there be a meeting between our minds and those of a past time, who have set their forms, signs, and symbols out for us to read in the body of a work of art.

My insistence on what I have been calling the aesthetic substance of the work of art—that is, its visual matter or its form—of course does not mean that I, or any other art historian, may have no concern for subject matter. However, I consider that there is a distinction to be made in terms of *artistic* value between those elements of narrative or of emotional statement that are incorporated essentially into the aesthetic substance of the image and work in synthetic fusion with it and those elements of subject which, quite differently, are not so incorporated but remain primarily verbal, or illustrative, in their kind. It is the exposition of the nature and meaning of the former: the functional unity between aesthetic form and subject matter incorporated into it as content that I believe should be the art historian's prime concern. This is what I mean when I speak of "style," and if those who consider me a historian of style understand the term as I do, I am happy with the title.

What, then, about all the other modes of current historical practice and the diverse considerations which enter into them, in almost no instance without some justification? More even than general cultural factors or those of political history, the most conspicuous modes of explication in art history today depend on factors of a sociological and economic kind. Sometimes there is in fact a set of clearly definable circumstances, and a consequent definable causal relationship, between such circumstances and a work of art, and in those instances

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their recounting can help significantly toward our comprehension of the art as such. There is no question of the value of a reciprocal confirmation of meaning that can be established between the facts external to a work of art and the work of art itself, when it can be efficiently and correctly done. But often, in my reading of such efforts, it seems to me that the external factors may be less accessible to definition than the artifact itself, or that the bridge of cause and effect between them may be very shaky. The danger of subjectivism is no less present in the interpretation of factors external to a work of art than of those within it, and the speculative risk may not be less. We have all of us observed the character of immediacy and, sometimes, of acutest pregnance with which the work of art is able to convey the quality of the historical moment from which it has survived. This virtue may entail a vice: the danger that the art historian who is trying to relate an image to its contemporary sociology may fall into the circular fallacy of reading the context of the image in the light the image throws on it. There are not only these methodological hazards to be noted; there is also a decision of intellectual economy which we must make. Many of the studies which approach art from a sociological or an economic point of view lavish far more effort and attention on the factors that surround the art than on the art itself, as if the setting, not the stone, were the important matter. If the primary matter of art history is, by definition, art, should not our main expenditure of effort be on it?

The subjectivity of the art historian has, as one of its inevitable components, the perspective imposed by his own place in geography and time. But this is by no means an inflexible limitation, and it is possible for the art historian to transcend it in significant measure, depending on his experience and, even more, his self-discipline. The central business of the art historian (as we have defined it) is necessarily speculative, but the more his understanding of the historian's problems, techniques, and controls the less his speculative risk becomes, and the more the probability of coincidence of his controlled speculation with the truth. But the personal and historical limitations that the art historian bears are not just limiting; they also may carry an advantage. Each view of history that can satisfy the historian's basic tests—internal consistency and apparent consistency with the observed facts—has an element of validity in it, and presents us with a facet of a whole historical truth. Each such contribution contains a new truth, which must be understood in the light of the preceding truths, and all of them then reciprocally adjusted to one another. Indeed, the complexity and richness of interacting views on the material of art history as they come to light resemble, in this richness and complexity, the art historical phenomena themselves. It should be observed, however, that the soundness and usefulness to our understanding of such "new" contributions tends to come less from what may be "revolutionary" in them than from the possibility of their interaction—or collation—with views already in existence. The achievement of truth in art history is, like history itself, a process, which no less than history is dynamic and cumulative. Though our thinking must, in part, be speculative, and depend in some measure on subjective response, it nonetheless contains the promise of an eventual approximation of the historical actuality.

I think there is no need for me to stress, at this point, my acutest difference with those art historians who would divorce all that is subjective from the discipline of art history, and insist that this subjective matter travel under a separate denomination, "criticism." To do this might indeed purify our writing of much error, but it would not help what is left—an impoverished skeleton of chronicle and statistics. To my mind, the historical and critical processes are one and indivisible; and there is no reason, either, why art history should not attain at times to the status of literature—or even poetry.

Whether we like the denomination or not we are all of us, however fallible, like the Berensons and Bodes of the past, a kind of priesthood, and we serve that which is best

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in mankind. Let me close with the words a much older and far wiser Harvard man, John Adams, wrote to his wife from Paris in May of 1780: "I must study politics and war that my sons may have liberty to study mathematics and philosophy . . . in order to give their children a right to study painting, poetry, music . . . "

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Max Beerbohm and the law of levity

by Joseph Epstein

Max Beerbohm once claimed that there were fifteen hundred readers in England and another thousand in America who knew what he was about. Small enough numbers, one would have thought, but he claimed them with a faint air of boastfulness. When S. N. Behrman first visited Max Beerbohm at his home in Rapallo in the early 1950s, Beerbohm showed him a publisher's statement from the firm of Alfred A. Knopf, which had recently reissued a book of his essays. On the right-hand side of the statement was an unbroken column of zeros. "*There's* a publisher's statement!" he announced ("carolled" is the word Behrman uses). As a frequent sojourner in used-book shops, I can testify that Behrman's own book, *A Portrait of Max,* handsomely printed and lavishly illustrated though it is, and charmingly written into the bargain, is an almost inevitable inmate upon the dusty shelves in these shops. Beerbohm would doubtless have been cheered by this, too—evidence that both the life and work were quite unsaleable.

In the closing paragraph of a 1947 essay in celebration of Max Beerbohm's seventy-fifth birthday, Louis Kronenberger remarked, "How big Max's audience will be a generation, or a century, hence is something else again." A generation has now passed, and I think I know how big his audience is: fourteen hundred in England and eleven hundred in America. As for the size of his audience in 2047, my guess is that he will have thirteen hundred readers in England and twelve hundred in America—cultural progress in this colony is slow but steady. Yet all of these readers, I have no doubt, will be devoted. The taste for the writing of Max Beerbohm is a minority taste but a strong one.

If there were a job description for a Max Beerbohm reader, it would, I fear, be severely delimiting. To begin with, the Max Beerbohm reader must be a fairly bookish person, someone who knows a certain amount of literary history and has an appetite for the literary life, for Max Beerbohm, though not an omnivorous reader, was himself literary from his pate down to his spats. The Max Beerbohm reader must have an affection for language and be pleased at witnessing it on exhibit with an always playful but ultimately serious precision, for Beerbohm was, to use one of his own words, a "precisian." Along with having an affection for language, he must enjoy seeing it artfully deployed—he must, that is, adore style, for Beerbohm was one of those writers for whom, without style, there is no message or indeed much of anything else. The Beerbohm reader must take pleasure in irony, for irony, the art of saying one thing and meaning another, was at the center of much that Beerbohm wrote. Delicate, whimsical, sly, his was irony of a kind quick readers are likely to miss. (Test sentence: "To give an accurate account of that period," he wrote in an essay entitled "1880," "would need a far less brilliant pen than mine.") Finally, the

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Max Beerbohm reader must share the comic view, which means that he can see the prospect for laughter in all but the most dire of human commerce, and especially not fail to see it in himself, for to take oneself altogether seriously, Beerbohm once averred, is to court insanity.

How might one best describe Max Beerbohm to someone who knows nothing about him? Well, for a start, one might imagine D. H. Lawrence. Picture the shagginess of Lawrence, his thick beard, his rough-cut clothes, his disdain for all the social and physical niceties. Recall his passionateness—his passion, so to say, for passion itself—his darkness, his gloom. Think back to his appeal to the primary instincts, his personal messianism, his refusal to deal with anything smaller than capital "D" Destiny. Do not neglect his humorlessness, his distaste for all that otherwise passed for being civilized, his blood theories and manifold roiling hatreds. Have you, then, D. H. Lawrence firmly in mind? Splendid. Now reverse all Lawrence's qualities and you will have a fair beginning notion of Max Beerbohm, who, after allowing that Lawrence was a man "of unquestionable genius," felt it necessary to add, "he never realized, don't you know—he never suspected that to be stark, staring mad is somewhat of a handicap to a writer."

To think of Max Beerbohm as D. H. Lawrence in reverse is a start but a start merely. He really was *sui generis*. George Bernard Shaw was on to something when, on May 2, 1898, in his last column as drama critic for the English *Saturday Review,* before turning the column over to Beerbohm, he wrote: "The younger generation is knocking at the door, and as I open it there steps sprightly in the incomparable Max." Beerbohm had to live with this epithet all his days, and once, writing to his first biographer, John Bohun Lynch, he mildly protested against it:

> Years ago, G.B.S., in a light-hearted moment, called me "the incomparable." Note that I am *not* incomparable. Compare me. Compare me as essayist (for instance) with other essayists. Point out how much less human I am than Lamb, how much less intellectual than Hazlitt, and what an ignoramous beside Belloc; and how Chesterton's high spirits and abundance shame me . . . . Apply the comparative method to me also as a caricaturist.

In this same letter Beerbohm, who was chary of having a biography written about him, especially while he still lived, added:

> My gifts are small. I've used them very well and discreetly, never straining them; and the result is that I've made a charming little reputation. But that reputation is a frail plant. Don't over-attend to it, gardener Lynch! Don't drench and deluge it! The contents of a quite *small* watering-can will be quite enough.

A point to be made about both these passages is that each is quite accurate. As an essayist, Beerbohm is less human than Lamb, less intellectual than Hazlitt, and so forth. He never did strain his gifts; he did use them well and discreetly; he had in his lifetime, as he has now, precisely a charming little reputation. Frail plant though his reputation may be, the same cannot be said of his talent; it was a delicate flower, no doubt, yet a hardy one. But let us turn now to examine it at its seedling stage.

Max Beerbohm's father was a man born in Memel, in Baltic Germany, of Dutch and German and Lithuanian extraction, who had settled in London at the age of twenty-three and had married an English woman with whom he had three sons and a daughter. He made a modest success as a grain merchant. When his first wife died, he married her sister, with whom he had three more children, two daughters and a final child, a son, Max. His father was sixty-one when Max was born, his mother in her forties. The Beerbohms' was by all accounts a happy household and a comfortable one—so comfortable for Max that he never left it until his marriage, in his late thirties, to the American actress Florence Kahn. As one would expect from a man with a subtle sense of humor, Max Beerbohm had a strong antip-

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athy to the clichés of conventional psychology, and, given the fact that he adored his parents and his brothers and sisters, he wondered if he would one day be thought victim of an Oedipus complex. After mentioning this to S. N. Behrman, he paused, then said: "They were a tense and peculiar family, the Oedipuses, weren't they?"

Max was in awe of his two half brothers, Herbert and Julius. Herbert was an actor and theatrical manager, and was known professionally as Herbert Beerbohm Tree. He was large, red-haired, and robust, with a madcap sense of humor. (Once, when a man walked past him groaning under a grandfather clock he was carting on his back, Herbert announced, "My good fellow, why not carry a watch?") Julius was an unflappable dandy, a gambler with a taste for disastrous financial schemes, whom Max remembered once polishing a translation from Heine while downstairs in his house mover's men were taking away his furniture. Of his brothers Beerbohm wrote: "Herbert was (then and always) a hero to me. But, let me add, Julius was a god."

His older brothers were adult and long out of the house when Max Beerbohm was a boy. The household he grew up in was consequently a feminine one. In it the young Max, a precocious and precise child, was the cynosure. In his biography, *Max,* David Cecil makes the interesting point that Max was not a mother's boy but what "can be described as a sister's boy." Not a bad thing to be, a sister's boy, for it gives one a certain ease in dealing with females; a receptivity to the gentler aspects of culture, over which women have traditionally presided; and a corresponding distance from the brutishness of a steady fare of youthful male companionship. In Max Beerbohm's instance, the sister in question was Dora, who was five years older than he and a child with a talent for drawing and decorative art and a sweet selflessness that later led her to become a postulant of the Anglican Order of Sisters of Mercy. It was in large part from Dora, and within the walls of his family home, that Max Beerbohm learned the rudiments of the art of pleasing—an art that, as he grew older, he would eventually buff to a high sheen of perfection.

So adept was Max Beerbohm at this art of pleasing that he is perhaps the only writer of the past hundred years to go through the English school system without being spiritually scathed. Accounts of his school days present no tales of his being bullied, as was E. M. Forster at the Tonbridge School, or of him as the victim of a totalitarian monstrosity in miniature, as Orwell makes out the school he calls St. Cyprians to be. As a schoolboy, Beerbohm loved Latin and was clever at drawing and had no interest in games. Charterhouse, the public school to which he was sent at age thirteen, was not much to his taste, but he survived it by reading Thackeray, drawing charming caricatures of the masters, and when necessary withdrawing into himself. At Charterhouse he learned, as he later put it, "the knack of understanding my fellow-creatures, of living in amity with them and not being rubbed the wrong way by their faults, and not rubbing them the wrong way with mine." There was never a trace of the rebel in him; even as a young boy he was too detached for rebellion or even for serious participation in school activities. He was an onlooker, more comfortable on the sidelines, someone who finds the spectacle of life rather more interesting than life itself. He was, in two words, "an artist."

Along with his other gifts, Max Beerbohm had the gift of an equanimous temperament. He was one of those lucky people to whom life never seemed to present itself as a struggle. He appears never to have felt the need to dominate; envy was an emotion unknown to him. It was said that he never had an adolescence but instead went directly from childhood to young manhood. When he arrived, at nineteen, at Merton College, Oxford, he seems to have been fully formed. He was self-contained, self-controlled, self-sufficient. His career at the university was of the kind Evelyn Waugh wished he had had: effortless, elegant, quietly dazzling.

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Shortly after arriving at Oxford, at Ryman's to purchase some engravings for his room, the young Beerbohm saw Walter Pater—"a small rock-faced man, whose top-hat and gloves of *bright* dog-skin struck one of the many discords in that little city of learning or laughter"—and judged him to be coarse. While an undergraduate he published caricatures in some of London's smartest journals. He placed an essay, a *succès de scandale* entitled "In Defense of Cosmetics," in the first issue of that smartest of all smart literary magazines, *The Yellow Book.* Oscar Wilde announced that he had a prose style "like a silver dagger." A self-declared dandy, Beerbohm was famous for his clothes, his wit, his sangfroid. When the artist Will Rothenstein, who was to become his lifelong friend, arrived at Oxford to execute portraits of the leading figures at the university, Beerbohm was among his choice of subjects. He did not complete his last year at Oxford, for the life of literature and art beckoned too seductively for him to remain a student. He needed a degree about as much as the Pope needs a bowling trophy.

Whom the gods would destroy, they first grant early success. Max Beerbohm, however, was able to elude the gods. He did so through precise knowledge of his own limitations and a sense of humor about himself. At twenty-four he published his first book, a slender volume of seven essays—with a bibliography appended that included a letter to the editor of the school paper at Charterhouse and a schoolboy Latin exercise—which he entitled *The Works of Max Beerbohm.* (His next two volumes of essays he entitled *More* and *Yet Again.*) In the essays of this first little book his entire artistic program was adumbrated. In "Dandies and Dandies" he set out the aesthetic that was to govern his own creation. Ostensibly writing about Beau Brummell, he noted: "All delicate spirits, to whatever art they turn, even if they turn to no art, assume an oblique attitude toward life." Of Brummell specifically, but of himself more generally, he wrote: "Like the single-minded artist that he was, he turned full and square towards his art and looked life straight in the face out of the corners of his eyes," which is as exact a formulation of the method of the ironist as one is likely to find. From the figure of the dandy, too, may be extrapolated Beerbohm's own yearning, in his art, for perfection in detail in all things. Like Brummell yet again (and Beerbohm with him), the dandy is "ever most economical, most scrupulous of means." There remains only to add that the dandy, like the artist, strives to please chiefly himself. What we have here is the full prescription for Max Beerbohm's art, both as a prose writer and as a caricaturist.

In an essay entitled "Diminuendo," written when Beerbohm was all of twenty-three, he predicted his own early retirement from the hugger-mugger of London for the life of contemplation. (Was this prediction meant to be ironic? "I wish," he once wrote, "I could cure myself of the habit of speaking ironically; I should so like to express myself in a quite straightforward manner.") "What uproar!" he announces in this essay. "Surely I could have no part in modern life." Here he avers that the life of action has no charm for him. It is instead only "the things one has not done, the faces or places one has not seen, or seen but darkly, that have charm." He imagines his retirement spent in some backwater English village, where he will borrow his neighbor's copy of *The Times.* He declares himself already a back number. "I belong to the Beardsley period," he writes, which was of course riding its crest at the very moment he indited the sentence. He claims he will stop writing; he is ready to stand aside without regret. The essay closes on the following absolutely accurate predictive sentences: "For to be outmoded is to be a classic, if one has written well. I have acceded to the hierarchy of good scribes and rather like my niche."

Although he lived six decades beyond the 1890s, although all of his best work was done much later than the Nineties, Max Beerbohm became—and seemed to wish to become—indissolubly linked to that decade. "I am," he once remarked, "what is known

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as 'an interesting link to the past.'" But then he himself forged that link and rather insisted upon it. The Nineties was the period of his artistic formation, the period of Oscar Wilde and Aubrey Beardsley, Henry James and Walter Sickert, a time when Meredith was still walking the earth and Thomas Hardy and Whistler and Shaw. It was the era of the aesthete—and an aesthete Max Beerbohm ever was. In later life he returned to draw figures from the Nineties over and over; his literary tastes were rooted in the decade as well, causing him to overrate some writers for their stylishness (Lytton Strachey, in my opinion, for one) and to be antipathetic to all art not grounded in the beautiful. One of his many complaints against Shaw was the latter's blindness to beauty. Of Shaw's panning *The Importance of Being Earnest,* Beerbohm once remarked, "Perhaps while the play was going on he was improving his theory of rent."

If Max Beerbohm was an aesthete, he was an aesthete with a serious difference. The difference was that, unlike almost every other aesthete, from Flaubert to Pater to Pound, his aestheticism was never permitted to override his common sense. S. N. Behrman well says that "the animating spirit of all Max's criticism—as, indeed, of all his writing—is a cultivated common sense." The emphasis needs to be placed on the adjective "cultivated," for his common sense was informed by a true artistic sensibility. He once said of Trollope that he "reminds us that sanity need not be philistine." Of him it can be said that he reminds us that one's adoration of art need not extend to lunacy.

It was during the Nineties, which was his own twenties, that Max Beerbohm began to build his reputation. His was the reputation of a charmer, a literary and artistic lapidarian. He worked small and took pride in doing so. "How many charming talents have been spoiled," he wrote, "by the instilled desire to do 'important' work! Some people are born to lift heavy weights. Some are born to juggle with golden balls." Max Beerbohm was, obviously, among the jugglers.

The golden balls he kept in the air were those of the essayist, comic draughtsman, and elegant young man about town. His friends were Aubrey Beardsley, Will Rothenstein, and Reggie Turner. Turner, whom Beerbohm knew from undergraduate days at Merton College, was the wealthy illegitimate son of Lord Burnham, the press lord; he was a homosexual, a failed novelist, and was said by Somerset Maugham to be the most amusing man he had ever known. Of his own novels Turner once said: "Other people's first editions are rare. With me it's the second editions that are rare; in fact they don't exist." Max Beerbohm simultaneously kept up a vigorous social round in the highest reaches of English society; as a charming and socially presentable young man, he frequently dined among the Balfours and Asquiths and Churchills, where he would on occasion meet Henry James, whom he described as looking "like a Russian Grand Duke of the better type." James was nearly thirty years older than he, but paid him the compliment of treating him as an equal. David Cecil tells the story of James and Beerbohm standing together at one such dinner party when a woman came up to declare that they looked very distinguished. "We *are* distinguished," Henry James replied. "But you need not look so terribly so," she responded. "We are shameless, shameless!" said Henry James.

Living at home, earning a few pounds for an essay here, a caricature there, Max Beerbohm never held a serious job until 1898, when he was asked to become drama critic of the *Saturday Review.* He jumped at the opportunity—backwards. He had the gravest doubts about it, but agreed to take it chiefly because, his father having died, he thought the additional money would be useful at home. But he began on a note of disclaimer: his first column was entitled, "Why I Ought Not to Have Become a Dramatic Critic." He was not, as he noted in that column, stagestruck. He was happy among pictures, had an unenlightened but real love for music, cared about literature most of all and could talk about it intelligently. Having

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grown up as the brother of Herbert Beerbohm Tree, he explains, he has never been able to associate the theater with glamour but instead only with "the conclusion to a dinner or the prelude to a supper." He has little interest in branching off, as his predecessor G. B. S. did, into "discussions of ethical, theological or political questions," about which he claims to be "singularly ill-informed." Worse, his is a satiric temperament, which makes him amusing when laughing at any one but deadly dull when praising. He is sure that having to write this column is "quite likely to spoil and exhaust such talent as I might otherwise be exercising in literary art." His one advantage is that, having written these columns, at least he will not be compelled to read them. Talk about blowing one's own trumpet. Has anyone ever organized for himself a more extraordinary fanfarade?

His disclaimers were not made in false modesty; they were, once again, quite accurate. Although Max Beerbohm stayed on as drama critic for the *Saturday Review* for fully twelve years, he is not among that very small group of very special drama critics, a group that includes Hazlitt, Shaw, James Agate, and, in our own day, the young Kenneth Tynan. He was not sufficiently febrile; the missionary spirit did not exist in him; he was temperamentally too cool. He asked that a play be entertaining, convincingly coherent, and intelligent—and in the theater, then as now, that was way too much to ask. As might be expected, he was good at deflation: amusing about the hypocrisy of English audiences, imprisoned in linguistic ignorance, watching Signora Duse play *Hedda Gabler* in Italian; riotously funny about the mad unreality of Sarah Bernhardt's memoirs; penetrating on Shaw "using art merely as a means of making people listen to him." None of his reviews is inept; most have felicitous touches, charming asides, digressions from which one wishes he would never return to the business at hand. But for the vast most part his drama criticisms grow boring when he begins to discuss the play under review—which is another way of saying that Max Beerbohm was an essayist and not a critic.

Which, in turn, is another way of saying that Max Beerbohm was above all else an artist. In a tribute to the music hall comedian Dan Leno, he wrote: "In every art personality is the paramount thing, and without it artistry goes for little." He went on to say that especially was this so in the art of acting, but I would assert that it is no less so in the art of the essay. Think of a significant essayist and you think of the personality he conveys: the gentle Charles Lamb, the passionate William Hazlitt, the gloomy George Orwell. Max Beerbohm's artistic personality is not so readily captured in a lone epithet. It is complex and elusive, yet distinct for all that. It is the personality of the slightly world-weary spectator, sitting along the sideline, a cigarette in hand, a man far from indifferent to worldly things but not quite caught up in them either; a man of considerable sophistication who has yet retained a certain oddly childish mischievousness; charming but not hotly intimate; ready to admit his own flaws but too exquisitely tactful to point out yours; yet for all his charm, his admitted naïveté, his penchant for fun, decidedly not someone over whose eyes you can ever for a moment hope to pull the wool (make that, in Beerbohm's case, cashmere).

Max Beerbohm was too much the conscious artist not to be aware of the impression his own work conveyed, or of the difficulties that personality in art could make. Cyril Connolly, for example, regarded Max Beerbohm as "a psychological case, a supreme egotist masquerading as a detached observer." Beerbohm once put his case in a letter to his wife:

> I am not thinking that "I am I" and must be interesting to everyone else. I am nothing more than I—a detached and puzzled spectator—detached, yet knowing more about myself than any other subject, and offering myself humbly for the inspection of others. I think there is a difference between this and egotism.

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Was this personality a fake, a fraud, a made thing? Beerbohm was of the generation of Wilde and Yeats, a generation that believed in masks. He wrote a longish fairy tale, *The Happy Hypocrite,* about the subject of masks. In it a Regency rake named Lord George Hell sets out to seduce the pure Miss Jenny Mere. In aid of this conquest he wears a mask—an actual mask—that lends him a look of goodness and virtue. So long does he wear the mask, so long does he try to live up to it, that at the book's close, when he is inevitably unmasked, his real face has changed, and "line for line, feature for feature," his own true face becomes the saintly face of the mask he had been wearing. The tale's final paragraph reads:

> So he took her in his arms, as though she had been a little child, and kissed her with his own lips. She put her arms around his neck, and he was happier than he had ever been. They were alone in the garden now. Nor lay the mask any longer upon the lawn, for the sun had melted it.

The moral is not in the least murky: the mask, worn long enough, becomes the man. I suppose it can be said that Max Beerbohm created his own mask. Unlike so many others, he set to work on it young and perfected it early. Most of us would like to create a mask of our own, which would represent us at our own highest self-valuation. The modern invocation to "be oneself" implies one's having a suitable self to be. Many of us, not finding that self suitable, try masks but cannot quite bring them off: the eyebrows won't stay straight, the mustache keeps lapsing into the mouth, the nose permits no breath. It is a botch, which Beerbohm's never was. In him the mask became the man, and the man and mask became, as he signed his caricatures and as devoted readers tend to think of him, Max. It is as Max that I should like to refer to him for the remainder of this essay.

The year 1910 was the turning point in Max's life. It was the year he quit his job as drama critic for the *Saturday Review,* which he had long before found onerous in the extreme. As a prose writer he was a perfectionist—he had always discovered writing to be much more difficult for him than drawing—and his weekly deadlines did not permit of the polish perfection requires. He wrote his weekly *Saturday Review* piece on Thursdays; even decades later he would wake on a Thursday morning with a clutch at his heart in momentary fear about having to set aside the day to write his criticism. If the pressure of these deadlines was hell, dispensing with them altogether was nearly heaven. That same year, at thirty-eight, he married the actress Florence Kahn, and made his plan to move, permanently, to Rapallo.

A man's marriage is perhaps the appropriate place to put to rest the question of whether or not he was a homosexual. The question only arises because Malcolm Muggeridge raised it some years ago in an essay entitled "The Legend of Max." Not that Muggeridge questioned it; in his essay he asserted it: "Beerbohm, it seems to me to emerge, was in panic flight through most of his life from two things—his Jewishness and his homosexuality." It emerges *for* Muggeridge, though no evidence for either assertion emerges *from* Muggeridge. Even from the old Mugger himself, this is pretty wild stuff.

As for the claim that Max was Jewish, Muggeridge contends he once heard this from a man who once heard it from Herbert Beerbohm Tree. Yet odd, does it not seem, that Max, a man supposedly ashamed of being Jewish, would take to wife a woman, Florence Kahn, who was herself Jewish? The claim for Max's homosexuality is made on even shakier grounds; it is based wholly on association—specifically, on Max's connection with the Wilde-Beardsley circle in the Nineties. That Max while an undergraduate had an infatuation with a music hall performer named Cissy Loftus is not allowed to stand in the way. Nor is the fact that he was later engaged to an actress in his brother's theatrical company, and after that had a love affair with yet another actress. Odd, too,

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that a man in panic flight from his homosexuality would choose to flee with a wife in tow. Does Malcolm Muggeridge, now that he is an earnest Christian, still believe what he wrote about Max? If he does, I hope Saint Peter will one day ask him to supply more serious evidence for his assertions—will make such evidence, in fact, an unwaivable requirement for his entrance to heaven.

In the event, Max's departure from London for Rapallo proved a most cunning move. "When a man is tired of London, he is tired of life," Samuel Johnson wrote, "for there is in London all that life can afford." But Max was not a man to be put off by a Dr. Johnson quotation; nor, as we shall see, a man to be overly impressed even by Dr. Johnson. Besides, a Londoner born, he really had had all that London could afford in the way of fame, sociability, urbane pleasures. Italy was then so much less expensive than London and would allow him to work at his art at the leisurely pace it required. The Beerbohms acquired a small house in the town of Rapallo, long a haunt of English Italophiles; the house overlooked the Gulf of Genoa and was called the Villino Chiaro. In this small house, working in a small study on the terrace, Max produced some of his best work: the fantasy novel *Zuleika Dobson,*[1] the stories of *Seven Men,* the essays in *And Even Now* and other books, and drawings too numerous to catalogue.

What is of especial interest is how little Max seemed to need the outside world. Living frugally, alone with his wife and a single servant, each day he would suit up, pop a straw boater upon his exceedingly round head, and repair to his terrace overlooking the Gulf of Genoa. From the terraces of nearby villas he was occasionally sighted, alone, laughing, doubtless at some superior joke, or twist of language, or human oddity that occurred to him in his endless ruminations upon the past. He never bothered to learn Italian; he rarely went into the town of Rapallo; he had no interest in touring Italy. In time he became an object of intellectual tourism himself, receiving guests who had just come from visiting Bernard Berenson at I Tatti and would afterward call upon Somerset Maugham at Villa Mauresque. He returned to London from time to time to help mount exhibitions of his drawings (he took a serious interest in all the details having to do with his own work), and he and his wife returned to live in England during the two world wars. But for the rest, from 1910 to 1956, he lived for all intents and purposes imprisoned in Villino Chiaro and utterly free in his own imagination.

Standing on that terrace for the better part of forty years, the sun above, the blue Gulf of Genoa before him, of what did he think? Of the past, doubtless, but the past, one imagines, in very small pieces: the chin of Kipling, the back of Shaw's neck, the beard of Rossetti. From there perhaps he strode to his study on the terrace and redrew these figures from his own past that he had drawn so many times before. "I can draw caricatures at any moment," he once wrote to his wife, "and how I rejoice in them. *They* are what I was put into the world to do." A great many others have rejoiced in them as well, except perhaps those who were their subjects. Edmund Gosse, in a letter to Logan Pearsall Smith, noted that Max had done a caricature of him and, as with most of Max's subjects, he was not likely to appreciate it. "We don't like it, and you won't like it, but must pretend, as we all do, that you like it. You can console yourself, at any rate, with the thought that it will give enormous pleasure to your friends."

Charming Max's caricatures are, but harmless fun they aren't. He claimed he was a Jekyll as a writer but as a caricaturist a true Hyde, and once referred to himself as "a ruthless monstrifier of men." His own elegant definition of a caricature cannot be improved upon: "The most perfect caricature is that which, on a small surface, with the simplest means, most accurately exaggerates, to the highest point, the peculi-

1 Yale University Press has just brought out a new edition of *Zuleika Dobson* featuring Beerbohm's own illustrations: *The Illustrated Zuleika Dobson,* 350 pages, $19.95.

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arities of a human being, at his most characteristic moment, in the most beautiful manner." Yet a Max caricature is never a delineation of physical peculiarities merely, but instead uses these peculiarities to penetrate his subject's personality. The personality caught will be found to be comic in its pretensions, or vulgarity, or stupidity, or obtuseness. He loved, too, to play with comic incongruity. My own favorite of his caricatures in this line comes from the book *Rossetti and His Circle* and is entitled "Mr. Morley of Blackburn, on An Afternoon in The Spring of '69, Introduces Mr. John Stuart Mill." In this drawing a willowy and bloodless John Stuart Mill, hat in one hand, a little leather bag containing galley proofs in the other, looks off into the distance as a small, sharp-nosed John Morley is speaking to a highly dubious looking Rossetti, who fingers his goatee; in the background hangs a Rossetti portrait of an extremely sensual pre-Raphaelite woman. The lengthy and perfect caption reads:

> "It has recently," he says, "occurred to Mr. Mill that in his lifelong endeavor to catch and keep the ear of the nation he has been hampered by a certain deficiency in—well, in warmth, in colour, in rich charm. I have told him that this deficiency (I do not regard it as a defect) might possibly be remedied by *you*. Mr. Mill has in the press, at this moment, a new work, entitled 'The Subjection of Women.' From my slight acquaintance with you, and from all that I have seen and heard of your work, I gather that women greatly interest you, and I have no doubt that you are incensed at their subjection. Mr. Mill has brought his proof-sheets with him. He will read them to you. I believe, and he takes my word for it, that a series of illustrative paintings by you would," etc. etc.

Max's caricatures were always prettily done. Although he drew them easily, even rapturously, he nonetheless took great pains in perfecting them. What makes them special is that in his drawings he joined caricature and cartoon. Not only are his drawings salient but so are the situations in which he places his subjects. As John Felstiner has remarked: "Beerbohm's innovation, one that only he was capable of making, was to bring the dynamics of parody into caricature." This invests his caricatures with not only the broad truth of satire but the more delicate truth of irony. It also frees them from the charge to which caricature is most liable, that of crudity, and lends them a weight in insight to which no other caricaturist can lay claim. "It is this immediate clarity of insight, free from all malice or prejudice, which makes Max superior to most caricaturists, even to Daumier," W. H. Auden wrote. "Even his most devasting portraits never strike one as unjust; one never feels that for personal or ideological reasons he had decided to uglify his victim before he looked at him."

Although Max never ceased to draw, later in life his caricatures seemed to lose their merry malice. "I seem to have lost my gift for dispraise," he told S. N. Behrman. "Pity crept in." But not everywhere. Max never lost his distaste for pretension, and for no one did he feel this distaste more sharply than for those men whom the world regarded as geniuses. Something there was about extravagantly large talent that set Max off, that made him wish to find its weakness, to diminish it, to bring it down to size. Perhaps it was the narcissism of genius; perhaps its confidence in its own primacy; perhaps its disregard for everything smaller than itself. Whatever it was, no genius ever quite passed muster with Max.

E. M. Forster once remarked that Goethe was the only genius who wasn't stupid. Max would probably have assented, if Forster would agree to remove Goethe from his generalization. In his essay "Quia Imperfectum" Max ponders why an obscure painter named Wilhelm Tischbein never completed a portrait of Goethe that he worked sedulously to persuade Goethe to sit for. Later in the essay, he conjectures that Tischbein was infatuated with an English woman in Naples, which caused him to break off a number of meetings with Goethe, thus per-

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manently delaying completion of the portrait. Earlier, though, he suggests that Goethe may have "irked" Tischbein. But it is obvious that it is Max whom Goethe irks. It is Goethe's perfection that gets to him, all-embracing Goethe, who, as Max writes, "was never injudicious, never lazy, always in his best form—and always in love with some lady or another just so much as was good for the development of his soul and his art, but never by more than that by a tittle." Or, as he puts it earlier, "a man whose career was glorious without intermission, decade after decade, does sorely try our patience." He certainly tries Max's patience, and throughout this essay Max subtly but relentlessly chips away at the marmoreal German genius.

It is the self-importance of geniuses, their absolute confidence in their own value, that Max cannot abide. It is the chinks in their personality that he prefers to emphasize and, in so emphasizing, to magnify. In his essay "Hosts and Guests," he mentions what a miserable guest Dante was in exile, forever complaining about the conditions he met with in the houses in which he stayed; and Max adds that Dante would probably have been a worse host "had it ever occurred to him to entertain any one or anything except a deep regard for Beatrice." His animus extends even to that most congenial of geniuses, Samuel Johnson. In a brief essay entitled "'A Clergyman,'" Max recounts a brief but definitive put-down of an obscure fellow whom Boswell, in his *Life of Johnson,* refers to only as "a clergyman." The scene for this little devastation is set just before dinner at Thrale Hall. Boswell, interrogatory as ever, is questioning Johnson about the great sermonizers of the day, when the following exchange ensues:

> A CLERGYMAN, whose name I do not recollect: Were not Dodd's sermons addressed to the passions? JOHNSON: They were nothing, Sir, be they addressed to what they may.

Slam! That is it. The clergyman has popped up and been shot down by the cannon of Johnson's confidence. He is never heard from again; his name isn't even recollected; he is target practice for genius. Max writes: "My heart goes out to the poor dear clergyman exclusively." Max then goes on to recount how, as he imagines it, the clergyman never recovers from this blow, the paw of a lion flicking a mouse, and that, as a result of it, he dies young, never to have known a pleasing moment for the remainder of his days. "I like to think," Max ends the essay, "that he died forgiving Dr. Johnson."

Max himself was a good deal less forgiving of the geniuses of his own day. Something in strength there was that made him search out its weakness. He was appalled by the bullyboy in Kipling and detested the violence in his writing. He recognized that Ibsen was a genius but could never forgive him his humorlessness. Of William Morris he wrote: "Of course he was a wonderful all-round man but the act of walking round him has always tired me." He ridiculed the wildness and wooliness of the Russian writers, who were then being translated into English by the Garnetts, in his comic piece "Kolniyatsch," a name deriving from the English lunatic asylum Colney Hatch. Antipathy was the strongest emotion he felt toward Yeats: "Geniuses are generally asinine," he noted, "but his particular asininess bores me and antagonizes me . . . ." As for Bertrand Russell, of him Max remarked: "It is Bertrand Russell's saving grace that he isn't a woman. As a woman he would have been intolerable." Apropos of T. E. Lawrence's wretched translation of *The Odyssey,* he said: "I would rather *not* have been that translator than have driven the Turks out of Arabia." It was the absence of subtlety he deplored in Shaw—"the best brain in England but no beauty except that of an engine"—and his unwavering self-confidence that caused him to be a bad influence "even on himself." When his secretary told Max that he would have liked meeting Sir Isaac Newton, he replied, "I would have taught him the Law of Levity."

The one genius of his time for whom Max retained reverence was Henry James. Not that this reverence was unmixed with com-

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edy. He saw the humor both in and about Henry James. He drew at least six caricatures of James. In one James is doubled over, as if in great pain, and the caption reads, "Mr. Henry James in the act of parturiating a sentence." In another James, his all-seeing eyes bulging beneath his domed forehead, is kneeling outside a hotel room door, outside of which are a pair of male and a pair of female shoes, his ear to the keyhole. The caricature carries no caption, but if it did it would clearly read, "Mr. Henry James learns about sex." (Max waited to publish this caricature until after James's death.) And of course his parody of James, "The Mote in the Middle Distance," is unsurpassed—so good that even James delighted in it.

But the comedy that James occasioned in Max did not lessen his regard for the writer he once described in a poem as "indefatigable alchemist." David Cecil writes, persuasively, that "Henry James was the high priest of Max's chosen and professed faith." Both writers were moral aesthetes, and, as Cecil nicely puts it, "Max's spiritual history may be described as a journey from the crude aestheticism preached by Oscar Wilde to the finer aestheticism—moral as well as literary—manifested in Henry James." Max Beerbohm's favorite line from James reads: "Be generous and delicate and pursue the prize." In New English translation this means: Keep your sympathy, keep your subtlety, and keep the ambition always to write as well as possible. Although Max remained critical of James on small points—he once compared James's penchant for revising his early work in the style of his later phase to "patching pale gray silk with snippets of very dark thick brown velvet"—it was to James, at the close of Max's life, that he returned again and again for replenishment of the ideal of the beauty and moral vision of art.

Does the august phrase "moral vision" seem too high-flown to apply to Max Beerbohm himself? It was Henry James who, in a tribute to Turgenev, said that the great question about any writer is, "How does he feel about life? What in the last analysis is his philosophy?" The word "philosophy" and the name "Max Beerbohm" seem to want to fly apart. In his essay "Laughter," Max allowed that he might have a certain mellow wisdom, but went on to say, "I suffer from a strong suspicion that things in general cannot be accounted for through any formula or set of formulae, and that any one philosophy, howsoever new, is no better than another. That is in itself a sort of philosophy, and I suspect it accordingly; but it has for me the merit of being the only one I can make head or tail of." I believe that in this anti-philosophy a philosophy can nonetheless be found; it is the philosophy held in common by nearly all the great essayists.

To be an essayist is to divest oneself of the belief in a general set or system of ideas. All the great essayists, from Montaigne through Hazlitt to Beerbohm to Mencken through Orwell are not so much anti-philosophical as a-philosophical. (Orwell, true, claimed to be a socialist, but he is never less convincing than when making that claim.) None is notably religious. The very form of the essay—discursive, tentative, enmeshed in the particular—seems to imply that, to life's great questions, there probably are no answers, only hints, shadows, fleeting moments of elucidation. Mencken once put it straight out, announcing that no one knows who created the universe, or what intentions lie behind natural laws, or why sin and suffering were sent into the world, and maintained that anyone who claimed to know the answers to these questions was a con man. The essayist is by nature a skeptic: in Montaigne's case, a truly philosophical skeptic; in Hazlitt's and Orwell's cases, passionate skeptics; in Mencken's and Beerbohm's cases, laughing skeptics.

Max Beerbohm's skepticism grew not only out of the forms in which he worked but out of the methods he applied to those forms. He was a past master at parody; his book *A Christmas Garland* is prized by all who adore parody. Yet isn't parody, despite the parodist's insistence that *on se moque ce qu'on aime,* a criticism of (and skepticism

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about) excess in style, joined, it is true, to a love of idiosyncrasy? He had the lightest loveliest ironic touch, yet isn't irony also the perfect medium for the skeptic—irony whose underlying assumption is that nothing is as it seems and hence that nothing may be taken at face value? The reason for Max Beerbohm's antipathy to genius is, I believe, genius's own antipathy to moderation and irony. Genius confidently knows what it knows; the skeptic knows that what genius is so confident it knows probably is wrong or not worth knowing. The fox nips at the hedgehog.

Yet it would be a mistake to leave the impression that Max Beerbohm was chiefly a nipper. While he is a writer who stressed limitation, his range as an essayist is surprisingly wide and he often struck surprisingly deep. His best single book of essays, which was also his final book of essays, is *And Even Now*. It displays his talent in its full flower. Some of these essays are built around a comic conceit ("How Shall I Word It?," "Kolniyatsch," "Hosts and Guests"), some are reminiscential ("A Relic," "No. 2 The Pines," "William and Mary"), and some are made sheerly out of reflection ignited by a minor incident or curious phenomenon.

In the latter class is a little essay entitled "Something Defeasible." It is about Max watching a small boy taking great pains to build a cottage out of sand at the seashore. Max exchanges a few sentences with the laconic young artist, then returns to his newspaper, about which he remarks (the year is 1919), "During the War one felt it a duty to know the worst before breakfast; now that the English polity is threatened merely from within one is apt to dally . . . ." (Quite a "merely"; Max won't permit speed-reading.) He comments on the changes within England; these have mostly to do with the slow destruction of English life as he knew it and loved it as a boy and young man. Meanwhile the sea is rolling in on the boy's sand cottage. Is the boy sad at the destruction of what he had worked so painstakingly to build? Quite the reverse:

> His face had flushed bright, and now, as the garden walls crumbled, and the paths and lawns were mingled by the waters' influence and confluence, and the walls of the cottage itself began to totter, and the gables sank, all, all was swallowed, his leaps were so high in air that they recalled to my memory those of a strange religious sect which once visited London; and the glare of his eyes was less indicative of a dreamer than of a triumphant fiend.

This is the first startling turn in the essay. The next comes in the sentence that follows it, which reads: "I myself was conscious of a certain wild enthusiasm within me." Yet it is "the boy's own enthusiasm that made me feel, as never before, how deep-rooted in the human heart the love of destruction, of mere destruction, is." Thinking back upon the destruction of England, he adds, "but I waived the question coming from that hypothesis, and other questions that would have followed; for I wished to be happy while I might."

So dark a note is far from the characteristic note in the artist whom Louis Kronenberger once called "The Perfect Trifler." Knowing that that note, too, played in Max Beerbohm's head makes the many lovely trifles he contrived all the more delightful, even dear, and their perfection all the more impressive. Max looked into the dark and, without underestimating its density by one jot, laughed, and his laughter has brought laughter to those of us who have discovered his splendor as an artist so that we, too, can be happy while we might.

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Raymond Aron: the last of the liberals

by Allan Bloom

A few weeks ago, when I was in Paris, I went to have lunch at my friend Jean-Claude Casanova's home. As I entered the great doors of the building on the Boulevard St. Michel, I had one of those experiences which only an American amateur of things French would call Proustian. I felt a sudden shock, a powerful awareness of an absence linked to the entire substance of my adult life. I recognized that this was where Raymond Aron had lived and that I would find him there no longer.

I could not pretend to be his student or his friend, but he was the teacher and friend of all my friends, admired by everyone I admired on both sides of the Atlantic. He was the protective tent under which we lived, the urbane and always benevolent defender of reason, freedom, and decency when all these were passing through unprecedented crises. He incarnated the *bon sens* which is supposed to be the leading characteristic of liberal democracy and assumed the responsibility for presenting and representing that *political* possibility. He interpreted liberal democracy's purposes, outlined the threats to it, and continually discussed the strategies required to protect us from them. He had the broadest views and used them to guide his study of the remote details required for policy. His disappearance is equivalent to the loss of the framework in which we lived, believing it was permanent.

Aron (1905-1983) was a member in good standing of that last generation of French writers who by right of inheritance—a right extending back more than three hundred years—commanded the attention of the whole world. But he was at its edge, distancing himself from it and kept at a distance by it. He was more of an observer than a psychagogue; and he was passionately dedicated to liberal democracy, when all the charm seemed to belong to its enemies on the Right and the Left. He too drank at the same trough of German thought as did his contemporaries, but he reasoned about it, whereas they were more concerned with its emotive power. Thus he was more of a scholar than they, and more of a journalist, separating the two aspects of his activity rather than fusing them.

Aron began as a professor and became a political commentator during World War II when he was one of the editors of *La France Libre* in London. Afterwards his academic career led him to professorships at the École Nationale des Sciences Politiques, the Sorbonne, the École Pratique des Hautes Études, and the Collège de France. At the same time he became the regular political columnist of the *Figaro,* where he remained for more than thirty years. Of those famous Paris intellectuals, he was the only one who was really a teacher, committed to his students and accessible to them. He published countless books, twenty-six of them translated into English. Among the better known are *Peace and War*; *A Theory of International Relations*; *The Opium of the Intellectuals*;

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Clausewitz, Philosopher of War; and *The Imperial Republic: The United States and The World, 1945-1973.*

Because Aron was out of step with the fashions, he was more influential in foreign academic circles, as sociologist, political scientist, and philosopher, than he was in France, and his views on the political scene were more attended to by practitioners in the United States, England, and Germany than they were at home. There, his was a lonely voice until, near the end of his life, French intellectuals began to recover from their long affair with the Left and discovered that one of their great thinkers still remained and that he could give them guidance and inspiration. An extraordinary series of television interviews in 1981 (published in the United States under the title *The Committed Observer*) suddenly made him fashionable in the grand Parisian style, a position he did not seek, but one which vindicated his solitary dedication to the truth as he saw it. His teaching contributed to the formation of a new conservatism in France and the United States dedicated to the high ideals of reason and freedom which were the essence of the old liberalism he represented.

For me, personally, he was the man who for fifty years—that is, my entire life—had been right about the political alternatives actually available to us, who had seen the real possibilities and faced them intransigently against all the prevailing temptations. This means, simply, that he was right about Hitler and right about Stalin and right that our Western regimes, with all their flaws, are the best and only hope of mankind. On the big questions he was always right and about the daily or emergent ones as often right as anyone is likely to be.[1] And he attempted to meet the intellectual challenges posed by the currents of thought hostile to liberal democracy. I could go to him for support and clarification in a world where such sureness of touch is almost nonexistent. In all of this he resisted the modes and did so without doctrinairism or indignation. He was a Frenchman who understood America, really understood America. And, although he was temperamentally attuned to the universal, Enlightenment strand of French thought, he knew that the intellectual world which liberal democracy was committed to defending contained much more than Cartesian rationalism. He was therefore a perfect link between an American and that old culture which is essential for Americans if their horizon is not to be utterly impoverished and which is ever harder for them to experience.[2]

When I was a young professor at Cornell University, Aron came to deliver an important lecture. My study, political philosophy, was much despised as old-fashioned and unscientific by the authorities and notables of that institution. But Aron, the famous European social scientist, the expositor of Weber, was the object of fervid respect. A large part of his lecture was devoted to an exhortation to American social scientists to relax their "value-free" stance, to study ends philosophically, warning them that if

1 The first of his dicta with which I became acquainted, one he uttered in 1949, is a fair sample of the kind of guidance he gave us all: "War improbable; peace impossible." This remains the best formulation of our situation.

2 In America, Raymond Aron was frequently called the French Walter Lippman. Although the comparison is in fact ludicrous, it was meant to convey reverence for a unique kind of man necessary to democracy but almost impossible in it: one who both educates public opinion and is truly wise and learned. This was the ideal Aron approached. The difference between the two men is most instructive. Lippman was almost always wrong on the greatest issues (i.e., Hitler and Stalin). His instinct was unsure. He was a snob. His judgments of men were too often off the mark. (He despised Truman.) He was ashamed of being Jewish. And his learning was superficial and not motivated by a real love of knowledge; it was for the sake of his journalism. He always thought power more important than knowledge. Aron had the contrary qualities. While Lippman merely acted out an edifying role, Aron was the real thing. He was a trustworthy companion in judging the events of the modern world.

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they did not do so they risked losing the one thing most needful. Aron said these things on that occasion for my sake and because they are true. How could I help but love him? He was good, and he was my benefactor.

All of this came back to me as I passed through the portal of that building. Much of that great mass of good luck I call my education could find its focus in Aron, and it then expressed itself in a mixture of desolation and delight. It is my belief that one honors one's betters by keeping silent about them, but memory and piety demand a few words about this man.

In reflecting on Aron two salient facts insistently present themselves. He was political, and he was really a liberal.

The extent to which Aron represented the political was impressed on me a long time ago when I was having one of my periodic visits with Kojève at the Economics Ministry. The great Hegelian, the spokesman for the end of history who had unraveled history's hieroglyphs, was unusually agitated that day because the Fourth Republic was traversing one of its many crises. Finally he announced, "I must call Aron." It was the only time I ever heard him express the need for enlightenment from another. It occurred to me that he was admitting that history is ongoing, that his *science* had to give way to *prudence,* a faculty for which there was hardly a category left in modern thought. Maybe Lenin's character was as important for the Russian Revolution as were the various determinisms of matter or spirit which fascinate the contemporary mind and drown human freedom or indeterminacy in great permanent necessities. Aron, out of his naïve and generous respect for philosophy, regarded Kojève as his superior (and Kojève was indeed an intelligence of a very high order). But Aron possessed a gift and a taste which were lacking to almost everyone else of his generation. The real activities of rulers and their decisions provided the ineluctable focus for his vision. What is in the power of men to do and what they look to in doing it were what he could not avoid being concerned with. For him the issue of our time was the opposition between Western freedom and Soviet tyranny. Anyone who tried to avoid this harsh opposition, repairing to the trans- or sub-political, was avoiding reality, which is naturally political. The political is the comprehensive order in which human aspirations for the good and the noble are actualized. It is the practical decisions of acting men which are most interesting and most revealing of human nature.

It has long been taught that politics is a superficial phenomenon and that its actors are secondary beings, with the possible exception of the extreme leaders of revolutions. Artists and intellectuals, at a remove from the position and perspective of statesmen, have been regarded as proper interpreters of politics. This is particularly true of France, and Aron's friends—for example, Sartre and Malraux—were exemplary of this viewpoint. He always sought to understand them and even to be like them. But he could not. It is not so much that ideological politics are from his point of view ideological, it is that they are not politics. They are, to employ Mann's self-description, unpolitical politics. Politics mean the governance of man and that can only be done from positions of legitimate power. The thinker must be really an advisor of princes or an enlightener of the voting public—he must adopt their perspective—if he is to be of any use or understand the nature of the political beast. The distinction between realist and idealist is not applicable here. There is excitement and moral dignity aplenty in real political life. Aron was not a realist and never adopted abstract poses such as that of power politics. Morality is inherent in politics, but one must always begin from the real situation and goals of the political actors—how one gets from here to there. Therefore, much of his writing was devoted to describing political reasoning and what stands in the way of it in our days. He was not the man to use language like alienation, domination, self-assertion, or anything of the kind. He was constitutionally incapable of talking like that in a persuasive manner,

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and what he did talk about was frequently boring to people who are not truly political, who do not recognize the special character of political life, who are not enthused by "who's in and who's out," by the day-to-day observation of political detail.

I believe that it often troubled Aron that his language did not have the same resonance as did that of men like Sartre. But he was an object lesson in real responsibility to them, and he pointed toward a world deeper and more exciting than the one they inhabited. It was a rare triumph of character for Aron alone to stick by his political insight when success and esteem lay elsewhere and while others whom he knew captured the imagination of a generation. He did what he had to do, not always sure that it was the most profound thing to do, often wondering whether modern writers or philosophers were not more gifted than he. But in the long run, the one that counts, he was more useful than any of them in helping us to understand our situation.

And I do not mean that he was useful only in the sense of day-to-day guidance in the practice of domestic and international politics. It is in the realm of theory that the political has been most effectively banished. Politics as a distinctive dimension of human life, not to speak of its being the most important one, has become extremely doubtful. It has been reduced or swallowed up by other disciplines which explain it away. Economics, anthropology, sociology, and psychology, among others, claim primacy over political science. Modern abstract notions like the market, culture, society, or the unconscious take the place of the political regime as the prime cause of what counts for human beings. Older views either denied the real existence of such things as cultures or claimed that the political is their central cause rather than their effect. Aron, honest man that he was, took every academic claim seriously, but he obviously yawned when anthropologists presented their interpretations of things because those interpretations are so far removed from the common sense of life and because they ask us to concentrate on things like art styles, when freedom and peace are what we really should care about. Economists attracted his attention, but only to the extent that their theories are related to the real lives of nations and help to explain freedom or its opposite. He could never believe that the economic model of man exhausted man or that economic interest is the only kind of interest. He was in the tradition of political economy and understood Adam Smith better than did the economists who cut their science loose from its political moorings. He loved history but real history, that is political history, and he yawned, against his will, at economic, social, and intellectual history, just as he yawned at cultural anthropology. He called himself a sociologist, but it was political sociology if it was anything.

As I have said, Aron's instinct was strong, and he followed it against all that has been academically powerful, and sometimes he was not fully conscious of the unerring aim of that instinct. He visited Germany as a young man. He immediately appreciated the enormity of what was unfolding there, and at the same time he was one of the first Frenchmen to fall under the influence or recognize the stature of Edmund Husserl and Max Weber. He was always alive to what was going on. But he used his experiences to his own ends. What he saw in German politics made him aware of how high the stakes in modern politics were to be and provided the impulse for his lifelong vocation of saving reason and freedom from the wreckage provoked by the new tyrannies. And these intellectual influences freed him from French academicism and certain deterministic abstractions. Phenomenology permits one to look at the world as it is without excessive reductionisms, and this gave support to Aron's natural penchant. Weber provided him with a way of looking at acting men as possibly self-determining and irreducible to the usually adduced determinants, and with arguments for the dignity and possibility of science against the background of a growing philosophically founded irrationalism. But I never saw any signs

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that he shared Weber's pathos, his sympathy for the irrationally committed, his anguish at the struggle of the gods. It was not that Aron was unaware of the abyss opening beneath our feet. But he really belonged to an older tradition of rationalism. He worked stolidly within the limits of the politically given and encouraged the use of statesmanlike prudence, which is neither bureaucratic rationality nor quasi-religious commitment. He knew, sadly, that the good regimes could lose, but one must do one's duty, be a good citizen of the city of God, and save one's anguish for oneself.

I would call Raymond Aron a political scientist, although I believe that he never held a chair in that discipline. I mean by political science what Aristotle meant by it, the architectonic science to which the other social sciences are ancillary or ministerial. This view is founded on the premise that man is by nature a political animal, and that politics is a dimension of his being and not a derivative of sub-political forces. According to this political science, the love of justice and glory are as primary as hunger or sexual desire, or, to refer to the latest trends, as awe before the sacred. Politics precedes ethics or psychology and can be looked at on its own grounds. The most distinctive thing about man is that he establishes regimes which claim to be just and sets down laws in accordance with them. The authoritative horizon established by these laws is derivative from nothing other than the intention or will of men. The oldest school of philosophy argued that this is *the* beginning, not only for political philosophy, but for philosophy *tout court*. This is the ground for the study and practice of politics which has collapsed. I do not argue that Aron re-established that ground. But, somehow, he stood firmly on it, and his life was an embodiment of the political possibility. He gave encouragement to those who had instincts similar to his to come out of the closet and showed them how to cultivate and use such instincts. What unites and gives health to the extraordinarily diverse persons who clustered around his protective example is the sharing of that will-o'-the-wisp, the political instinct.

Raymond Aron was a liberal, and as my title somberly suggests, I fear that he was the last great representative of the breed. I mean that he was persuaded of the truth of the theory of liberalism, that for him its practice was not only the best available alternative but the best simply, and that his personality fully accorded with his liberal beliefs. He lived—and probably would have died for—the strange spiritual asceticism, one of the most arduous of asceticisms, which consists in believing in the right of others to think as they please. It is one thing to die for one's god or one's country, another to die for the protection of the opinions of others which one does not share. The mutual respect of rights, a curious secondary kind of respect, is the essence of liberal conviction. And that respect, as the one absolute of civil society, is in reality very rare and becomes ever rarer. Aron really possessed it. He was never a conservative in any possible sense of the term, whether one looks to Burke, Hegel, de Maistre, or Milton Friedman to define it. Whatever in him may have appeared conservative to radicals of one kind or another had to do with his defense of the essential rights, and the form of government founded on and protective of them, against previously unseen theoretical and practical threats from Left and Right.

Aron's liberalism was that of Locke, Montesquieu, John Stuart Mill and, to some extent, Tocqueville. I make this qualification for the last named thinker, for I never saw in Aron a sense that anything truly important might have been lost with the passing of aristocracy. He, of course, knew all the arguments. After all he was an educated Frenchman. But he believed that the heights are accessible within well-constituted democratic regimes.

The creed of liberalism consists in the belief in the natural freedom and equality of all men and, following therefrom, that they have natural, inalienable rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of property; that they possess reason to recognize those rights and

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to construct governments; that government is legitimated only by the consent of the governed. Bound up with this is a conviction that there can be a progress of science, that science dispels the illusions which breed fanaticism and allow for the rule of priests, and that science will "ease man's estate." In short, Enlightenment is possible and good. Aron really respected man as man. Race, nation or religion never were decisive for human worth as far as he was concerned; the first was for him essentially irrelevant, and the other two were in principle matters of choice not fatality. He was more cosmopolitan than national, more attached to the universal principles of science than to any culture or religion. None of this was simple-minded in him. He knew the differences of nations and the importance of roots. He recognized that liberal democracy was a rare achievement, one that required severe moral prerequisites. But he never doubted that it was *the* achievement nor did he regard it as belonging to one particular race or tradition. In historical and cultural difference, of which he had a rich awareness, he always discerned the primacy of the unity of human nature and the common aspirations for peace, prosperity, and a just political order. All this contributed to his amazing combination of sobriety and humanity, his unfailing civility and his openness toward all opinions and the men who held them so long as they themselves were civil. The corrosive passions were almost totally absent from him although he lived in times when they were dominant all around him. He was not a hater although he was a partisan.

He knew that liberal democracy begins from selfish interests, but he also knew that those interests can be sublimated into a sense of common interest founded on our common suffering. He never gave in to the base interpretations of liberal society so popular among social scientists, not only because they are ignoble but also because they are not true. The liberal democracies are delicate mixtures of high and low, and as it is merely edifying to recognize only the high, it is a distortion to speak only of the low. He saw that men seek the common good but are often prevented from attaining it by their private interests. He was fully aware that there were moments of utter folly in democracies, but he never doubted their right to folly or contemplated favoring forms of government not based on consent.

In short, Raymond Aron was a perfect *bourgeois*. I use the term invented by liberal democracy's critics and enemies to describe the kind of man typical of it. He was reasonable, immune to the great romantic longings in the light of which the present is denigrated and sensible calculation about the future is made to appear small-minded. Such a man is a reflective rather than a passionate patriot, a good husband and father whose attachment to the smaller community attaches him more securely to the larger one, and, above all, he believes in the liberating power of education.

And this last is one of the most striking facts about Raymond Aron. He believed in an education that never ceases, an opportunity to look in the company of friends at life and the events around one in the light of philosophy, science, history, and literature. Democracy was for him the freedom of the mind to learn one's rights and one's duties for oneself, the overthrowing of old authority and the discovery of the independent truth. It is amazing the extent to which he remained a Normalian all his life, with a schoolboy's enthusiasm. He was very grateful for the opportunity which the École Normale Supérieure provided him. "La carrière ouverte aux talents" seemed just about right to him: a high-class education offered to anyone for free if he were able to profit from it, regardless of race, class, religion, or even nation. This education was, he was convinced, good for the community and good for its recipients. At the École Normale he learned the best there has been, and his friends were the best there were. Throughout his life he remained fascinated by his school companions, Sartre and Nisan, and thought his confrontation with them was a privilege and a permanent inspiration. The École Normale was a perfect union of the

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apparently conflicting demands of equality and the right to develop unequal natural gifts. Aron was quite aware that his intelligence and education were superior, but he was certain that this served the common good and that such superiority did not detract from the equal worth of all men based on their capacity for free moral choice. This set of delicately balanced convictions made possible his liberal consciousness.

Because the university was so personally dear to him, but far more because he knew that the university is the central institution in democratic society, he took a very strong stand against the wave of destruction which swept through the Western universities in the 1960s. The university is, or rather was, the substantial presence of the reason on which liberal democracy rests. If there is no reliance on, cultivation of, or respect for dispassionate reason, the rational rights which are all in all in modern democracy will wither away. The installation of the gutter in the halls of the university disgusted him. The loss of the tradition which was a source of vitality saddened him. The demagogic skewing of the only institution devoted to objectivity frightened him. If democracy cannot tolerate the presence of the highest standards of learning, then democracy itself becomes questionable. His reaction to the university crisis epitomized all that he was, and he was an ardent lover of the freedom of thought and the kind of society which encouraged it. The greatest sign of the decay of liberalism was the acquiescence of most people who called themselves liberal in the savaging of the university.

Aron was the representative of a spirit that dominated the political scene for a long time and that animated the regimes in which we live and which most of us wish to defend. They were founded and sustained at the peaks by men who believed in their principles. The politics of our time, the politics of which Aron was the committed observer, are totally dominated by the threats to liberal democracy from movements and regimes defined almost exclusively by their deadly hatred of liberal democracy. Fascism and Communism agree about their enemy, "bourgeois society." And they both agree that "rights" are "bourgeois rights." Both identify "capitalism" with "bourgeois society," and characterize the latter as the realm of selfishness, individualism, and vulgar materialism. Communism denies that reason can be free in bourgeois society; fascism insists that reason is what is wrong with bourgeois society and intends to replace it with passion. Both, therefore, take away liberal democracy's rational legitimacy. And both dismiss the homely morality claimed for mutual recognition of the rights of man, insisting that it is only enlightened self-interest.

Behind these movements is the most powerful thought of the last two centuries. Not since Kant has liberalism had the support of philosophy, whereas the enemies of liberalism can have the blessing of Marx and Nietzsche among others. All of this has rubbed off on most of us in one way or another. Hardly anyone today would be willing to defend the teachings of Locke and Montesquieu in their entirety, and hardly anyone remains emotionally unaffected by all the charms called upon by the critics of liberalism, whether they be tradition, compassion, roots, nature, religion, culture, or community. The good conscience of liberalism has been tainted, and most Westerners are only half-believers at best, if they are not utterly thoughtless or hypocrites. There now seems to be an ineradicable question mark after liberal justice, which is said to be just another form of exploitation. A debilitating relativism has grown out of liberalism's healthy scepticism.

But none of this was true of Aron. He had studied liberalism's critics better than most anyone. But finally they left him untouched. I do not assert that he had successfully refuted them, but his temperament made him immune to their appeal. He knew Sartre and Kojève and read Heidegger carefully. He spoke of them intelligently but could not be enthused by them as were so many others. He was an anachronism in the same sense Churchill was said to be an anachronism in

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England. They were healthy plants of an older world mysteriously flourishing in thinner soil and necessary for the protection of its offspring.

I have often suspected that liberals ultimately have to believe in progress, or something akin to it, even though intellectual modesty now forbids them to avow it. Their respect for man's freedom, and their willingness to risk so much in counting on its effectiveness, bespeaks a conviction that decency is not unsupported in this world. John Stuart Mill's certainty that the age of barbarism is past was only a particularly naïve expression of this faith. Something in Aron—and not only his good taste—forbade him the indulgence in the easy talk about nothingness so common in his time and in his milieu. For him the fundamental experience was not unsupportedness of the good. For this reason Hitler remained the obsessive puzzle of his life. How was it possible? He expressed his wonder about this to me again in our very last meeting. How could a murderous gangster who appealed to the darkest of pasts and looked forward to the cruelest of futures be the chosen leader of one of the best educated peoples the world has known? It was his great perplexity, but it never persuaded him that good is no more grounded than evil. Somehow this *fatum* in his nature sustained his sweet disposition throughout a life in which he was in daily battle with the greatest ugliness and in which all faiths were tried to the breaking point. He worked perpetually with a truly remarkable focus of energy, and his personality was a seamless unity. He must be judged not by any single part of his product but by his whole life—his scholarship, his teaching, his journalism, and his presence itself. One sees in it none of the spectacular metamorphoses so characteristic of intellectuals. He was what he was and, as such, achieved what others talked about all the time, authenticity. He was the living example of the possibility of the democratic personality. Finally all those who cared about freedom were forced to drink at this trough. He was the man who had lived liberal democracy in its best and most comprehensive sense, and to refer to him is to touch ground.

I said that I could not claim to be his student. But he was, in fact, my teacher. Not the least of what he taught me was to appreciate a man like him.

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Two incidents on and off Guam

by Brad Leithauser

I. Nothing was going to seem very
Strange after that extraordinary
Drive down to the beach in the back
Of a jeep, the road snaking
Through huge cross-sections of jungle even
Denser than what we'd seen before,
Uppermost fronds a dazzling, rich
White-bronze in that tropical sun, gray
Those further down, and nearly black
The warring undergrowth in which
Windfall coconuts lay
Like so many old, flaking
Helmets from that other War;

So that, when we found everyone
On the beach standing right
At the water's edge, watching the sea,
We fell in unquestioningly,
Gazes drifting until we too
Spotted in the distance, where
The sea was whitecapped, a pair
Of bobbing swimmers. They
Were drowning. A simple truth—but one
We couldn't grasp at first, nor quite
Grasp that the only thing to do
Was to stand and wait. A radio
Call had gone out; help was on the way.

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Help, at last, took the splendid,
Hearteningly larger-than-life form
Of a helicopter ripping across
The sky to come to a high, suspended
Clattering halt and release a fine
Rope ladder that landed just outside
The swimmers' reach. Now commenced
That clumsy, exacting process—so
Brutally, so agonizingly slow—
Of attempts at linkage; each new toss
Of the ladder falling wide,
As the fading swimmers flailed against
The pull of their local storm,

Until somehow, as we stood there
Watching, that deep, tortuous bond between
Man the maker and his machine
Was pared to a dangling thread,
And right before our eyes a half-dead
Body like a fish was hoisted through
The glittering, naked air
To the copter's belly—leaving two
All but disembodied arms to thrash
In the sunny scatter and smash,
The stunned smash and scatter of the sea.
  Now horrifying, hypnotizing
As this was, it was, finally,

Unreal as well, as though
We were watching a film-clip, some
Snippet of the evening news . . .
The entire ordeal—the bare
Line dropped again, then again, and then
That second swimmer delivered from
His gasping burial—at once so
Stirring, and so *unreal*:
Even as we yelled, whistled, clapped
Our hands, somehow still to feel,
As in a moviehouse, that we'd been
Played on by a drama whose
Performers were never there.

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II. The rubber feet pinch,
the window of the mask is scratched. Easing
out of my element, I inch
down the aluminum ladder

on the side of the boat,
legs trailing loose in the warm sea,
let go, drop and turn and float
successfully on my stomach. I send a blast

of air up the snorkel, spouting a crown
of salty water that, after
a looping pause, comes down
sweetly on my back, and begin, flush

with the reserved, lazing
powers of my new frog's feet, to coast
upon the surface. Under this blazing
noon sun the sea's so calm it can scarcely be

the medium in which, just three days ago,
those two swimmers I keep thinking about
were nearly drowned. The water's so
tranquil today you could swim out

for miles, it seems, letting it hold
you high like a child, aloft and kicking
in a parent's upraised arms. Assorted spilled
pastels, dissolved of all

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material commitments, flicker and glide
in the bay's upper reaches;
today the sea's wide-
open and the sun goes clear

to the rolling coral stone-
garden, some forty feet below, where
three divers in black wet-suits, two men
and the boyishly slighter

figure of a woman, drift to and fro,
poking about, exchanging
sweeping, emphatic messages by way
of hand signals. As enticing

as that sea-floor looks, still
more so—a grace to place
against any anemone's—are those tall
wavering columns of bubbles

rising from the divers' air tanks;
while risibly like the thought-balloons
one meets in comic books
and animated cartoons, they possess

a lissomeness, a vine-like
elevating loveliness that pulls me
closer. And when I flutter-kick
over to where the bubbles break

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the surface, nosing my mask right
into that climbing line of hundreds
and hundreds of spirited white
beads of light

something marvelous transpires: I am—again—
reminded of film, the colorless
televisions of my boyhood, that endless run
of laugh-tracked comedies in which

with some low-budget hocus-pocus
(the camera, to the strum of a harp,
slipping out of focus,
or a panning swing toward the center

of a painted target- or pin-
wheel-shape that would then
begin to spin)
one was forever being promoted

to those selective sectors
where cumulus banks are firm enough
for walking, a white sheet is every actor's
home- and office-apparel alike, and one finds

each humble face laughably
unaltered—bespectacled or buck-toothed,
bald or bulbous-nosed as the case may be, but *happy,*
for this is Heaven . . . And to this vision

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while I floated simply
in the upsurge of a stranger's
exhalations, body limply
open to the sea's slight suggestive nudgings,

came another, of which the first, for all
its silliness, was a kind of clue, a parody
whose unsullied original
might be obliquely

glanced at, indeed
had been glimpsed already,
for there was a sense of having peered
before into one of these

miraculous pristine

passages that wait beside you
always, if only it were known *which*
floorboard to take the crowbar to,
which stone uproot on the hillside, if only

you dared to; *this* tunnel, here, into a breath-
taking incandescence so intense the
body is as nothing in the path
of its streaming, weightless and homeless and

helpless, hopeful and afraid.

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Music

What the Cliburn contest thinks of pianists

by Samuel Lipman

It might seem an unlikely proposition, but it could be argued that those responsible for the 1985 Van Cliburn International Piano Competition—held late this past spring in Forth Worth, Texas—have somehow been influenced in their marketing strategy by the deathless advice the great English humorist Stephen Potter gave to failed tennis players: "If you can't volley, wear velvet socks." In the case of the Cliburn contest, volleying might well stand for the proper business of a piano competition: choosing, with some regularity, first-prize winners of musical authority and personal magnetism. Potter's notion of velvet socks surely can be applied to the lavish but meretricious coverage the competition received (and doubtless strove for) on nationwide public television at the end of the festive proceedings in early June.

To understand the present manifestation of this now most famous of American music contests, one must begin, not with the relatively brief history of the Cliburn award itself, but with the history of music performance competitions over the past fifty years or so. In the late 1930s, by all odds the most important competition in the world was the Queen Elisabeth contest in Brussels. Founded in 1937 as the Concours Eugène Ysaÿe (in honor of the great Belgian violinist), it gained luster from the association of the Queen with such famous performers of the day as Pablo Casals and Arthur Rubinstein. From the first years its prizes were an object of the ambitions of the Soviet Union, then embarked on a policy of cultural exportation in furtherance of the Popular Front against Hitler and Mussolini. Indeed, the USSR hit pay dirt in the first two events in Brussels: violinist David Oistrakh won the first prize in 1937, the pianist Emil Gilels in 1938.

Not every winner in Brussels went on to achieve the fame of Oistrakh and Gilels. For example, in 1952 and 1955 the contest was won by Americans: the pianist Leon Fleisher and the violinist Berl Senofsky, neither of whom made great solo careers. (Fleisher's fate was sealed by a persistent hand problem, which has proven incurable to this day, despite much-ballyhooed attempts at medical intervention.) In 1956 the gold medal was won by the then very young—and still very Soviet—pianist Vladimir Ashkenazy; though Ashkenazy was later to become a kind of superstar in London, his first appearances after his 1956 victory were ambiguous successes at best.

Whether because of its undeniable musical seriousness or because its most recent winners had hardly set the musical world on fire the Queen Elisabeth contest was devastatingly upstaged in the spring of 1958 by the first Tchaikowsky contest in Moscow. This was of course Van Cliburn's moment in history. The young American from Texas seemed to personify not only pianistic accomplishment and Southern charm but also the desires of mankind (skillfully shepherded by Nikita Khrushchev) for a thaw in the Cold War and an end to the arms race.

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When Cliburn returned to the United States for a hero's welcome, he brought with him a certified performance of the famous Tchaikowsky Piano Concerto, a piece which some say he played more excitingly before he left for the USSR. Though he eventually played and recorded many other virtuoso concertos, the Tchaikowsky and its close relative, the Third Concerto of Rachmaninoff, were to be the center of a decade-long career of fantastic show-business proportions. With the triumph of Van Cliburn, indeed, contests and prizes for the first time bid fair to supplant concerts as the road to musical success and riches.

Because of the importance of the USSR in what is after all still a bipolar world and the formidable powers of the Russian publicity apparatus, the Tchaikowsky competition remains *primus inter pares* in the contest world. The success of the Tchaikowsky, combined with certain well-known organic weaknesses of creativity in composition and individuality in performance, has inspired the creation of innumerable similar events, large and small, serious and frivolous, of greater and lesser distinction, all across the world. When added to such already existing competitions as the Chopin contest in Warsaw, the Marguerite Long-Jacques Thibaud contest in Paris, and the Busoni competition in Bolzano, these contests have helped to make the category of contest winner—even that of contest entrant—a recognized artistic profession.

What about American events in this cornucopia of musical prizes? For some years our chief domestic musical contests were the Leventritt and Naumburg prizes, both established by patrician New York families of German-Jewish origin. Although some of their winners have done well in domestic musical life, the most famous winner of the Leventritt prize is none other than Van Cliburn, whose victory in 1954 failed to establish him as a major concert artist. Sadly for America's cultural independence, it took Krushchev's kisses of peace to make Cliburn a stage personality in his homeland.

Given the role of a contest in Cliburn's career, it is hardly surprising that at the beginning of the 1960s a kind of supercontest was founded in Texas in the name of that state's most famous musical son. It is ironic indeed that today, after the collapse of Cliburn's pianistic career—he has not played publicly for many years—it is the contest established in his name, and furthered with his enthusiastic participation, that keeps his name in front of his once adoring public.

As Cliburn's own career has gone from shaky to nonexistent his contest has become ever more splashy. The first prize of the 1962 Van Cliburn International Piano Competition was no less than $10,000; now, twenty-three years later, the first prize is described by the contest's sponsors as "in excess of $200,000," including (according to the organization's press release), a

> cash award of $12,000, Van Cliburn Competition Gold Medal, Lankford-Allison Memorial Cup, debut recital appearance in Carnegie Hall, concert tours in North America and Europe for a period of 30 months, air travel by American Airlines' domestic routes, recording on the Vox Cum Laude label and studio recording of a recital in Hilversum, The Netherlands.

As the first prize has grown in value, so too has grown the interest of the contest's sponsors and administrators in securing publicity. Already in 1981 the contest was covered across the United States on public television; in addition, *The New York Times* published an extensive series of articles on the contest by Harold C. Schonberg, who had recently retired as the paper's senior music critic. Not surprisingly, it is now standard practice for the Cliburn Competition to supplement its own public relations with the services of a high-powered New York publicity firm.

To date, there have been seven Cliburn contests, including the most recent one. It goes without saying that it is much too early to tell what the long-term result of the 1985 competition will turn out to be. But it is clear that the winners of the first six con-

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tests, taken as a group, leave much to be desired. Of these six gold-medal winners, only one—the Romanian pianist Radu Lupu in 1966—has gone on to make a major international career. Just listing the names of the other winners—the American Ralph Votapek in 1962, the Brazilian Cristina Ortiz in 1969, the Russian Vladimir Viardo in 1973, the South African Steven De Groote in 1977, and the American André-Michel Schub in 1981—serves to chronicle the disappointment of high hopes. It can safely be said that the success rate of the Cliburn contest in picking career winners, while perhaps not markedly worse than that of other contests, is certainly no better.

This unhappy verdict would hardly come as a surprise to those responsible for the Cliburn contest. Thus, when the decision was made to publicize the 1985 contest on public television, the big question must have been how a nationally televised program could be made to seem wholly absorbing and fascinating in the absence of any sterling musical record. The answer, whether intended or not, was to treat the contest, and the process of running it and competing in it, as the whole story. To do this it was necessary to subordinate music and musicians to what came across the television screen as a kind of beauty contest/talent show, a show in which everything was anonymous save the contest itself.

Even a brief description of the program—aired on PBS in June—is sufficient to convey its atmosphere of musical facelessness. It began with voice-overs taken from telephone conversations in which several foreign contestants were informed of their acceptance into the preliminary round by the Van Cliburn Foundation's English director, Andrew Raeburn. Then we were shown pictures of the arrival of several contestants at the Dallas-Fort Worth Airport. Here the emphasis was on demonstrating the contestants' wary gratitude for all the kindnesses about to be heaped on them by their hosts. The prevailing tone of it all was demonstrated by the confident and at the same time embarrassed words of one of the greeters: "I'm Joan, I'm Joan, and I'll be your momma for three weeks."

The scene now shifted to the room in which each contestant picked a piano from those provided by various manufacturers including Steinway, Baldwin, Bechstein, Bösendorfer, and Yamaha. Here the contestants were unnamed for the television viewer, as they would remain, with few exceptions, until the very end of the program.There seemed little rhyme or reason to the choice of any particular instrument; as picked up by the television microphones, the tone of these very different pianos was much the same. Indeed, it was clear from the way this process was presented that the prevailing emphasis of the program was to be on the similarity of the contestants and their experiences, on the miraculous interchangeability of all these brilliantly gifted young people.

The next scene—which showed the drawing of lots for the order in which the contestants were to play—concentrated on the immense discomfort, sometimes marked by open anxiety and sometimes by pointless bravado, that musical contests engender in even the most insouciant participants. Here attention was focused for a moment on the poor unfortunate—her name, alas, *was* given—who had the ill luck to be assigned the opening slot. It was clear from her crestfallen reaction that she knew her fate was to play her best and then have the performance forgotten as pianist after pianist followed in her wake.

Next came Mr. Raeburn's introduction, in all too suitably orotund accents, of several jury members. As if to emphasize the "international" character of everything, two of the jurors were described as each representing two countries. One was said to represent Hungary and the United States, the other West Germany and the United States. Neither, it might be added, was in any real sense American. With these nobly universal sentiments, the contest was at last declared open and the music began.

A young lady—the drawer of the unlucky

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opening performance slot—started playing the C major Étude, opus 10, no. 1, of Chopin. This work, of immensely difficult arpeggios in the right hand set against a slowly striding octave bass, provides a challenge (especially when played as an opening selection) which few pianists of this or any other time can satisfy. Her performance hardly began remarkably; but before she had gotten very far in this short étude the master stroke of this year's Cliburn contest television coverage—the "velvet socks," as it were, of Stephen Potter—was revealed: by the miracle of up-to-date electronic technology, the television screen now showed *another* pianist taking up, without any audible jump, where the first pianist had left off. Before the étude had lumbered to its end, a total of what I think were *five* different pianists —all save the first unknown to us—had each played part of the piece more or less well. The piece too, I might add, was unidentified.

Next followed snippets from mostly well-known piano works, all unidentified, played by several contestants, also unidentified. There was Liszt's étude "La Campanella" in a sloppy rendition, a well-played bit of the first movement of the *Pathétique* Sonata of Beethoven, some of the opening of the *Chromatic Fantasy and Fugue* of Bach played by four pianists, each imperceptibly shading into the other. There was a passage from the Chopin Scherzo in C-sharp minor, some of the opening movement of the famous Haydn E-flat major Sonata (the best piano playing on the program to this point), and the end of the *Mephisto Waltz* of Liszt. In this performance of the Liszt the lyrical moment before the coda was languid to the point of discontinuity and the coda itself something of a mess. The final bit of music given in this segment of the program was a small part of the so-called Dante Sonata of Liszt; this rendition, first stodgy and then inaccurate, did little justice to what in the right hands can be an enthralling composition.

At this time the names of the twelve semi-finalists were announced, again by the commanding Mr. Raeburn. On the screen could be seen shots of the tearful non-sur-

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vivors; their sadness was, of course, counterbalanced by the glee of the new, temporary victors.

The scene now shifted to a demonstration of one of the distinguishing features of the Cliburn Competition, the contestants' performance of chamber music with a respected string quartet. The ensemble on this occasion was the Tokyo String Quartet; significantly, this well-known group's name was mentioned only once on the program, and then only by a contestant in passing.

The first piece of chamber music was the Scherzo of the Schumann Quintet; once again, the music, like the performers, went nameless. The movement's opening was roughly played by a female contestant, who was allowed to get as far as the beginning of the first trio section before another pianist, this time a man and a more idiomatic player, was spliced in. He got through the return of the opening, whereupon his place was taken for the second trio by another male contestant. This pianist seemed unable to keep both the syncopated phrasing and the necessary accented downbeats in mind at the same time. Nevertheless, he was allowed to get up to the last seven bars of the movement, when his place was taken by pianist number two, who played the next two bars of the seven, followed by pianist number three for two bars, and finally pianist number one for the last three bars, consisting simply of four tonic chords.

This dog's breakfast of music making (for which, of course, the pianists could not be blamed) was followed by a similar presentation of the Scherzo of the Brahms F minor Quintet. Here, it must be said, the program did vouchsafe the identity of the piece being played, since one contestant implied in passing that he was playing the work. This time the music was played by no less than *seven* pianists, with the same return of various hands to play tiny parts of the ending bars. Under these conditions, there could be no possibility of listening to the music as music, of actually hearing a work of art on its own terms. And even as a way of comparing the performances of different pianists, this rapid and putatively seamless succession of different abilities, technical approaches, and expressive styles could only end by confusing even sophisticated viewers.

At this point four judges appeared on the program: Soulima Stravinsky (a pianist and the son of Igor Stravinsky), John Giordano (conductor of the Fort Worth Symphony), Malcolm Frager (a pianist and winner of the 1959 Leventritt contest), and Wolfgang Stresemann (formerly the manager of the Berlin Philharmonic and the son of Gustav Stresemann, German Chancellor in 1923 and then Foreign Minister from 1923 to 1929). They talked, each for a few seconds, about such weighty matters as the extraordinary gifts needed to win such a contest. Finally Stresemann allowed as how, because genius will out anyway, it was not necessary to feel such terrible responsibility as a judge.

Then the six finalists were announced, though so little camera time was spent on each contestant that it was still difficult to match faces to names. Suddenly there was a shot of one of the finalists playing her concerto in a rehearsal room for the man who would conduct the performance in the final round; though his identity was not to be revealed until the printed credits at the end of the program, the conductor was in fact Stanislaw Skrowaczewski, formerly the music director of the Minnesota Orchestra.

Now came the performances of the concertos. In itself, this emphasis on concerto playing as the highest public criterion for winning contests speaks volumes concerning what contest managements feel their work is all about. Important as the ability to play excitingly with orchestra is in the making of careers, it remains true that only a relatively small number of virtuoso concertos—whether for the piano or for the other major solo instrument, the violin—contain the very greatest music; concertos in the repertories of popular soloists are played today largely for the purpose of whipping up an audience. Most of the great music for the piano is truly solo music, written to be performed by the pianist with no one coming between him (or her) and the audience.

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This music includes Bach (if, that is, contemporary taste deigns to allow it to be performed on the piano at all), the sonatas and variations of Beethoven, the sonatas and shorter works of Schubert, Chopin, and Brahms, and even a surprisingly large number of compositions written in the twentieth century. To place the public weight on concertos, as this television program did, is at worst to distort the work of the pianist, and at best to make clear that the pianist as artist stands foursquare in the world of show business.

The concertos performed at the end of the program were, with one exception, drawn from this virtuoso stockpile. Two finalists, like Siamese twins, shared part of the last movement of the Third Concerto of Prokofiev; one finalist played the closing pages of the Third Concerto of Rachmaninoff; two finalists alternated in the finale of the Brahms D minor Concerto; and last of all the pianist who turned out to be the gold-medal winner played the last quarter of the first movement of—surprise—the Tchaikowsky B-flat minor Concerto of Van Cliburn's glory days.

There is little point here in second-guessing the judges' decisions; clearly they heard much more from all the contestants—and heard it live rather than from a television set—than was presented on this program. On the basis of what I heard, the best playing came from the sixth-prize winner, Hans-Christian Wille, 27, of West Germany, and the third-prize winner, Barry Douglas, 25, from the United Kingdom. Wille played the end of the Prokofiev (after the segment had been soggily begun by fourth-prize winner Emma Takhmizian, 27, from Bulgaria) with great force and clarity. Douglas began his portion of the Brahms last movement with real musical authority and technical command; when he was succeeded in the piece by second-prize winner Philippe Bianconi, 25, of France, there was a significant drop-off in dramatic tension and pianistic finish. The fifth-prize winner, Károly Mocsári, seemed technically overmatched in the last part of the Rachmaninoff Third Concerto, a work of course also associated with Cliburn's own triumphs; one had the feeling that the piece was playing Mocsári, and that both thereby lost.

And so it all came down to the Tchaikowsky Concerto. The passage allotted to the grand winner, José Feghali, 24, of Brazil, ran from the reprise of the beautiful lyrical theme through the brilliant and taxing cadenza to the coda. What distinguished Feghali's performance most were the emotions and signs of commitment to the music that showed on his face as he played. He looked, rather than played, an exciting performance.[1] Pianistically he seemed cautious and often retrograde in his handling of the gathering excitement that the composer has written into the music; the cadenza, which can provide a stunning vehicle for an athletic keyboard player, lacked both hard-edged brilliance and ease and flow.

After a few *pro forma* words from Van Cliburn (his only real role in the program), the awards themselves were announced—not in a very accomplished manner—by F. Murray Abraham, the actor who won the Academy Award this year for *Amadeus*. The program ended with a short segment from Mr. Feghali's performance of the end of the second movement of the Tchaikowsky, followed by a long, slow list of credits in which were named, in addition

1 Without in any way suggesting that there is only one way of playing the Tchaikowsky Concerto, it might nevertheless be useful to stress that the work, in a proper performance, can affect listeners even today with the force of an electric shock. Such a performance was regularly given by Vladimir Horowitz in his earlier days; lovers of piano playing—and of the Tchaikowsky Concerto—are fortunate that there are three recorded documentations of his traversal of the work: the 1941 Carnegie Hall recording with Toscanini and the NBC Symphony (RCA CRM4-0914); the 1943 War Bond Rally live performance, again in Carnegie Hall with Toscanini and the NBC (RCA LM-2319); and a "private" recording of a 1953 broadcast performance with George Szell and the New York Philharmonic, once more in Carnegie Hall (CLS RPCL 2027).

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to the Fort Worth Symphony and Skrowaczewski, the numerous technical personnel who made the film. Special thanks were expressed to Mr. Raeburn for his services as "creative consultant." Mention was made too of grants from Mobil and the Tandy Corporation which made the program possible.

What lessons are to be learned from this television offering? How can one explain the obstinate refusal of those responsible for the program to present important music at sufficient length to make its *musical* effect? Why did those in charge fail to provide enough identification of those who played to enable a viewer who liked their performances to remember them and look for them in the future? Perhaps all these questions come down to one big one: *cui bono?*

The intended winner in this interlocking set of artistic failures was, clearly, the Cliburn contest itself. Like all important (or self-important) musical institutions, the Cliburn contest sees its survival as an institution as the highest good; to effect that single purpose, everything—it matters little whether it is the art or the artist—must be integrated, suppressed, and, if necessary, destroyed.

So the meaning of this television coverage is indeed simple. It is that music and pianists alike must take a back seat to the survival and perpetuation of the contest which was given birth to serve them. Unfortunately for those who would thus fit artistic life into an institutional Procrustean bed, contests are not art, administrators are not artists, and television editors are not musical arbiters. Here, perhaps, is something for the folks at the Cliburn to ponder as they begin to prepare for the next time: less thought must be given to the contest itself, and more—much more—to the contestants and the music they play. Then and only then, whether or not the contest is on the tip of every tongue, whether or not its winners all hit career jackpots, will the Van Cliburn International Piano Competition truly accomplish the purposes of art it should.

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Art

Di Suvero and constructivism

by Eric Gibson

From the beginning of his career twenty-five years ago the figure of Mark di Suvero has loomed large on the artistic landscape. Indeed, he is one of the few sculptors of his generation to have become something of a myth. In 1960 he made a dramatic debut at the Green Gallery with an exhibition of oversized sculptures. In the same year he was in a near-fatal elevator accident which for some time dramatically limited the range of his artistic activity. By the late Sixties, however, he was back in full possession of his powers, making sculptures on an even bolder scale than before. In the early Seventies he caused a sensation by going into self-exile, to protest the Vietnam War. And when he returned in 1975 he was greeted by a triumphant retrospective of his work at the Whitney Museum. All of this by now has helped to confer upon di Suvero a legendary status. Even his media image is that of the artist-superman—bare-chested, hard-hatted, working the controls of a crane or battling a resistant work-in-progress.

The Whitney Museum's retrospective was really the crest of the wave. It marked the return of the artist-exile at the moment when America was ending its commitments in Southeast Asia. It also presented di Suvero as both the legitimate heir of David Smith in the tradition of constructed sculpture and a younger, brasher rival to the Englishman Anthony Caro, whose own retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art had closed only a few months before. As such the Whitney retrospective signaled the end of one phase of di Suvero's career—its long, troubled beginning—and the opening of another in which one anticipated that di Suvero would be able to give full rein to his formidable creative powers, undistracted by physical disabilities or political interests. Ten years have passed since then, and now another di Suvero retrospective is on view, this one at the Storm King Art Center in Mountainville, New York.[1] How does di Suvero's work look now that all the hoopla is behind us?

The new exhibition, it must be said, is somewhat misleading. Comprising twenty-one sculptures indoors and eighteen outdoors, it omits the large-scale early works, such as *Barrel, Hankchampion,* and *Che Faro senza Eurydice,* that did so much to establish di Suvero's early reputation and announce his sculptural concerns and intentions. From the late Fifties the exhibition presents only the expressionistic, Rodin-inspired *Hand* sculptures; it then moves on to the post-accident pieces of 1961-67 without acknowledging in any way the important work that came between.

At the outset, then, we are given a dis-

1 "Mark di Suvero: Twenty-five Years of Sculpture and Drawings," which will be on view until October 31, was organized by David R. Collens, the Director of the Storm King Art Center. The exhibition's catalogue-brochure ($4.00) contains an essay by Phyllis Tuchman.

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torted view. As it stands, the visitor unfamiliar with di Suvero's sculpture is likely to come away from Storm King with the impression that his early works were part of a protracted "warming up" period during which he experimented with many different modes of sculptural expression before finally finding his true artistic self in the later (post-1967), large-scale outdoor sculptures.

The truth is very different. These small-scale works—at least those from 1961-1967—represent what I believe to be an interim phase of di Suvero's work. It consists of work executed during the long period of convalescence, that is, the period before he felt sufficiently recovered to *return* to making large-scale, gestural sculpture. Thus if we are to get any accurate sense of the inner logic of di Suvero's work over the years—surely the purpose of a retrospective of this kind—it is vital that we have these early pieces before us.

Di Suvero's early works (happily two are on view at the Modern and at the Whitney) were striking at the time, and remain so today, for the manner in which they fused the language of constructivism and the sensibility of Abstract Expressionism. They were six or seven feet high and formed from worn planks and pilings scavenged from the wharves of lower Manhattan; occasionally they incorporated more recognizable objects, such as ladders or barrels. These disparate elements were held together—and apart—by steel rods and chains in a manner which suggested forces held in permanent tension. While constructivist in their use of discrete, found forms and in their vestigial Cubist syntax, they were without the traditional Cubist "core" which would normally order and lock disparate parts. Instead, all the elements thrust away from the center, creating voids which di Suvero worked as eloquently as his solids. The result was sculpture whose drama resided in both its size and its vigorous, gestural character.

Much was made at the time—and in the years following—of the similarities between this phase of di Suvero's career and Abstract Expressionist painting, that of Franz Kline in particular. The cantilevered lengths of wood were seen as sculptural analogues to Kline's bold, black paint swaths, forms which likewise appeared arrested in space.

Yet far more important—and, as far as I know, little noticed at the time—was the way di Suvero altered the formal vocabulary of constructivism as it had existed from Picasso down through David Smith and, later, Anthony Caro. For in using battered pieces of wood and readily recognizable objects, di Suvero departed from the more tailored, elegant look of orthodox constructivist sculpture.

Artists such as Smith and Caro strove continually to de-emphasize—within certain limits, to be sure—the industrial origin of their forms, the better to accommodate them to the overall aesthetic program. Smith, even when using something as distinct as a wrench or a pair of tongs, achieved this accommodation by articulating the form's purely sculptural qualities—its mass or lack of it, its contours, its spaces. Caro, in turn, eschewed recognizably industrial elements—except for I-beams—preferring more generalized forms. And of course he painted his work. Both men consistently attempted to put a certain amount of distance between their finished sculpture and the scrapyard or the steel mill that was its source. "De-naturing," as this was referred to at the time, was nothing more—and nothing less—than the passage from nature to culture. The world of things was drawn upon and the object transfigured and so made part of the world of art. Such a transfiguration was vital to the success of constructed sculpture as it had existed prior to di Suvero. David Smith acknowledged this fact when he spoke disparagingly of "stopped images"—sculptures in which the borrowed industrial forms violated the integrity of the whole by affirming too explicitly its identity in "nature."

Di Suvero, in making no concessions to such refinements, in effect "de-aestheticized" constructed sculpture, bringing it down from the loftier realms of good taste in order to give it a rawer, more direct expressive charge and relation to the viewer. (In

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this there is a small element of irony, for it reflects the belief that constructivism, originally thought radical in its use of common or debased materials, needed the very sort of *bouleversement* it had administered to the established practice of its time.)

Nowhere was this "de-aesthetization" more evident than in di Suvero's unadulterated use of large, recognizable objects—ladders, barrels, and the like. In their consciously incongruous, "look-at-me" character they had a quality of artistic subversiveness and daring that suggested the artist's willingness to take enormous risks and his desire to make a brash gesture in the interests of making sculpture more "real."

All of this gave a populist dimension to di Suvero's work. He used whatever materials came to hand, as opposed to restricting himself to certain "ideal" forms, the implication being that anything is admissible in the making of art. The more direct, down-to-earth mode of address to the viewer implied a more democratic outlook, one deliberately opposed to the more rarefied, "fine art" creations of earlier constructed sculpture.

Di Suvero's 1960 accident—he was riding atop an elevator that crushed him when it failed to stop—brought his artistic activity to a halt. When he was well enough to sit in a wheelchair, he could only work by welding pieces of metal in his lap, or by using assistants to move modestly larger forms. These sculptures form an eclectic mix—not surprisingly, really, since they are the work of someone trying to get used to another order, another scale of sculptural operation. They make one realize how much the earlier works were scaled to an upright body. What we have in these works is di Suvero trying to teach himself a new language—new to him, anyway—but without leaving behind the old vocabulary.

Thus among this group there are works which come across as "drawing room" pieces—overly elegant, precious things made of overlapping and intersecting arcs of stainless steel, such as *Moonrise* (1961-62). Or there is *Bachpiece* (1962), a masterpiece of sculptural illusionism—admittedly a curious thing in di Suvero—in which a tilted chunk of beaten-up wood and three or four vertical nails stand at opposite ends of a sloping steel "hill," the tense, charged relation between the disparately scaled groups vividly suggesting four persons confronting a giant monolith. And there is *For Giacometti* (1962), a moderately large-sized floor piece (four feet high, six feet wide) in which, at opposite ends of a platform, a section of wooden beam wrapped in chain and another with a metal ring projecting from its top tilt away from each other. In its poise, dynamic tension, charged interior space, and gestural character, *For Giacometti* is closest to the earlier large-scale works. It conflates the essential qualities into what is almost a landscape configuration.

Not until di Suvero gets fully mobile again does he truly recover his sculptural momentum. When he does, it is in a manner even more vigorous and expansive than before.

In 1967 the artist shifted from wood construction to metal and embarked on a succession of enormous sculptures (thirty to forty feet high) made of extended I-beams and cables, apparently in an effort to recapture the impressive gestural style of his earlier phase. Owing to the attenuation of the I-beams, these later sculptures have reduced, linear silhouettes that make them look somewhat fragile and give them a surprising grace and elegance; in relation to their rougher forebears, they are almost refined. The earliest, *Are Years What? (For Marianne Moore)* (1967), carries over the staccato rhythms of the prior phase and so stands as a perfect point of transition. It is as if the accident had never happened and di Suvero was indeed simply moving on from what he had done before. What differentiates these sculptures, more than their size, is the introduction of an element that will soon become the artist's signature: the suspended or balanced form. Here it is two I-beam sections joined to form a "V," and hung by one end so that the "V" floats and rotates in space midway up the sculpture.

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If in these sculptures di Suvero does return to his former gestural manner, it is gesture with a new artistic center. This is understandable, for there can be no doubt of the causal link between this new campaign and di Suvero's full recovery from the accident seven years before. So sudden, and so extreme, is the shift in size, and so aggressively do these sculptures stake their claim to their environment, that they suggest a sudden release, an exultation at the onset of free, unfettered mobility—exactly what one might expect of an artist recently emerged from a period of prolonged physical debility and confinement, particularly an artist whose earlier work had been so animated and physical in character. All at once, it seems, di Suvero moves from a generalized, aesthetic expressionism to one that is personal, even autobiographical.

In the sculptures following *Are Years What? (For Marianne Moore)* the balancing element is no longer incidental: it is central to the entire work—in a way similar to Calder's stabiles, where forms are also suspended from firm structural supports. Additionally, these sculptures are not the spreading configurations of old: they are architectonic, structural affairs divided into two parts, "support" and "action."

It goes without saying that at such a scale, such feats as di Suvero performs are highly dramatic. The sight of *Mon Père, Mon Père* (1973-75)—with its enormous "V" form suspended horizontally some twenty feet in the air—is captivating, and not a little terrifying. Yet once one has gotten past the drama, these aspects strike one as gestures undertaken for their own sake. They have a decided attention-attracting character to them, a character one had seen earlier in di Suvero's work but now isolated and made the "subject" or point of the work. Other sculptors, notably George Rickey, have made balancing their "subject," but in Rickey's work it has a symbolic as well as plastic *raison d'être,* expressing continuity, stability, equilibrium. Di Suvero's balancing, by contrast, has no meaning outside itself. Even as an expressive gesture it falls flat, functioning as a diluted, more genteel version of the dynamic tension of the earlier works. What we have here, then, is not the coordinated set of aesthetic relations we associate with orthodox constructivism but instead a heroic demonstration—a demonstration of freedom from physical considerations and principles.

With this freedom comes another development in di Suvero's form vocabulary, again an outgrowth of tendencies seen in the earlier sculpture. If previously the artist used whole, recognizable objects in his work in order to "de-aestheticize" the constructivist language, to make it more "real" and accessible, in the large, post-1967 outdoor works he uses recognizable objects without giving them even vestigial aesthetic roles. Thus, suspended from the middle of *She* (1977-78)—a low, laterally spreading sculpture—is a steamroller drum. It hangs there inert, with no relation to anything else around it. Similarly, affixed to one end of *Sunflowers for Vincent* (1978-83)—a bright yellow, horizontal sculpture—is a stainless steel ship's propeller.

In these sculptures di Suvero's populist stance becomes more pronounced. The directness and relative ease of access of the early works—always, it should be stressed, existing on an *aesthetic* plane—is transferred to the physical realm as the artist increasingly makes sculptures with parts that can be pushed, rotated, or otherwise maneuvered by the spectator. The ultimate version of this is his increasingly frequent practice of suspending low platforms off his sculptures—there is one suspended from *She*—designed for the viewer to sit or recline on. In di Suvero's exhibition of recent work this summer at the Oil & Steel Gallery in New York there was even a piece whose "sculptural" members were *only* supporting such a platform. Clearly here the imperatives of constructed sculpture have been overturned and put in the service of a kind of "playground sculpture."

The emphasis on demonstration as the principal artistic statement, the increasingly explicit use of recognizable objects, and the

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more physical, interactive aspects of his sculpture tell us that di Suvero has moved a long way from the tradition of orthodox, constructivist sculpture. Indeed one might say that at this point di Suvero's sculptures are not so much constructivist as simply *constructed*. He has tried to extend into these monumental works the vernacular expressionism of his early pieces, but he has succeeded only in emptying them of any but the most transitory satisfactions. By renouncing his earlier aesthetic logic and formal rigor he has left us with the casual, the utilitarian, the entertaining.

As such di Suvero's sculptures represent not the vital extension of a tradition but the playing out of one. They anticipate, even clear the ground for, a figure like R. M. Fischer, who combines discarded industrial forms to make not abstract sculpture but "abstract" lamps, domesticating the constructivist impulse and taking the anti-aestheticism announced in di Suvero's work to its ultimate conclusion. Di Suvero's work thus stands as an important benchmark in the journey from late modernism to the formulation of the so-called postmodern canons of irony and the commonplace.

What a difference a decade makes! Ten years ago it would have been unthinkable to suggest that di Suvero stood in anything but the mainstream of modernist sculpture. That we can no longer hold this view is a consequence of the passage of time and the displacement effected by new art. No doubt di Suvero's artistic persona is robust enough to withstand these changes. Still, it is unlikely that we will ever again look upon his sculpture with the same innocent enthusiasm as we did before.

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Figures in three dimensions

by Jed Perl

When contemporary artists want their work to have an air of tribalism or antique cults, they generally end up producing sculpture. The wish to give modern art a mythic dimension sometimes gets in the way of the forms we see in front of us. And at times artists believe the mere presence in a gallery of hunks of wood or metal, clay or stone will work more magic than it really does. But there's a sense in which the artists have been right to take up sculpture, for sculpture keeps eluding the modern tradition of art created for exhibition. Sculpture can force the viewer into the position of an idol worshipper; you share real space with real objects, which is why the great modern sculptors' studios—those of Brancusi, Picasso, and Giacometti, for example—have the feel of cult sanctuaries.

More often than painting, modern sculpture suggests fundamental dissatisfaction with the conventional way of doing things. Mobiles, scrap metal constructions, readymades, earthworks: these are forms that, whether through whimsy, a spirit of zany speculation, or sheer grandiosity, call most of the Western tradition into question. It's under the general rubric of sculpture that a lot of the self-styled buccaneers of the 1960s and 1970s worked and continue to work. They've dug ditches, moved bodies of water, covered tracks of land out West, and generally come up with creations so overblown they elude the very idea of art. But if sculpture, through its dogged unconventionality, can sometimes spell aesthetic insanity, sculptors can also derive a special sanity from their insistence on marching to a different drummer. The unique lyric style of Donald Judd's work, for instance, comes from the way Judd uses his cool, factory-made non-art materials as a foil against which to play a series of very personal rhythmic variations. The actuality of Judd's work—the sense that it's been made, not imagined—is what saves these super-reductive statements from feeling banal. The pleasure is in the sense of simple poetic equations worked out in three dimensions.

Sometimes sculpture—with its surfaces to touch and its curves and angles to walk around—can feel like an oasis in the flat desert of painting. At least this is how I've felt at times in the past twelve months, which have been remarkable for a number of fine sculpture shows. Judd's two-gallery show at the Leo Castelli Gallery last fall was one of these. His work has the impact of something mastered—of an accomplished fact. Two shows of highly unconventional figure sculpture by younger artists had a very different feeling—one of open-ended surprise, of trails being blazed. These were Barbara Goodstein's show at the Bowery Gallery in the fall, and Timothy Woodman's show at the Zabriskie Gallery in the spring. Goodstein and Woodman (she is forty, he is thirty-three) are authentic independents who relish the range of challenges sculpture

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almost forces on the artist. They obviously enjoy figuring out what kinds of materials to use, how to present the work. Their choices are inventive and idiosyncratic. Woodman makes his reliefs of bits of painted aluminum sheeting held together with rivets; Goodstein does three-dimensional drawing in white plaster on black-painted plywood, as well as reliefs in more traditional terra-cotta. Goodstein and Woodman seem to be enjoying themselves as they create odd, delicate, often small-scale objects. They're both, in a sense, putterers. They tinker with materials in the way a sharp-minded inventor will.

Woodman's smaller-sized relief sculptures are the most purely charming works around. Despite the narrative twists Woodman uses to embellish a motif, his reliefs feel clear as water. They're unambiguous, unaffected, hardly ever sugary or arch. The little scenes —generally from one-and-a-half to two-and-a-half feet from end to end—are made up of a figure or two and some props, all fabricated of bits of metal colored with oil paint. The irregular overall shapes of the pieces are determined not by any formal idea of composition but by the way the elements come together to tell a story that often has a dark, violent, or shady side: a girl in a red dress is released from the clutches of a wolf by an axe-wielding young man *(Little Red Riding Hood)*; a carpenter hammers nails into a coffin *(Carpentry)*; one man pulls apart a fence so another can pass through, as if in an escape *(Crossing Under)*. In his recent show Woodman was ranging far afield, mining no one particular story or theme: there was a Christian legend, *St. George and the Dragon,* presented in medieval costume; a fairy tale, *Red Riding Hood,* in contemporary dress; and everyday scenes of men coming out of subway stations, as well as tabloid dramas of burglary and police-department rescues. What linked the show together was Woodman's knack for finding the moment which suggests a before and an after: Where is this man going? How did she get into this fix? Woodman has a sure instinct for the theatricality of sculpture: he can paint a scene with a couple of characters and a few sticks of furniture. Like his coffin-making carpenter, Woodman hits the nail right on the head.

Woodman's full-color reliefs, with their many paper-thin elements, exist somewhere between painting and sculpture. His methods are often a painter's, as when he describes a curve not by bending metal but by painting shadows on it. The arms and legs in Woodman's reliefs can recall parts of Léger's figures; and the bright color, sketchy paint handling, and informal interactions of bulky figures have something in common with the narrative scenes done in the 1960s by the Frenchman Jean Hélion, a painter who was years ago much influenced by Léger. What's sculptural in Woodman's work is the sense of how the drama unfolds. The arms, legs, heads, and bits of architecture and scenery roll off of one another like elements in a more addled, less formal version of Cubist construction. Woodman is a sculptor who doesn't exactly believe in volume: space is implied through the distance between flat, overlapping planes. Only in the way the figures take hold of the space around them do these reliefs really declare themselves a sculptor's art.

Woodman's pictorialism has taken him far, but in his large works—the reliefs that range from three to seven feet and frequently contain lots more figures—he meets, at least for the time being, the limits of his painterly method. The drop in quality from the small to the larger works is startling, though not, when one thinks about it, surprising. The small works are vignettes; one takes them in all at once. The white expanse of wall against which these small reliefs are set off in the gallery isolates the drama and gives Woodman's improvisational style a certain authority. Woodman's faces and expressions are often perfunctory (and some of the best reliefs contain figures whose faces are turned away from us), but this is okay in the small works because here, as often in a short story or a poem, we aren't expecting an authoritative, novelistic characterization. The small reliefs are slices of life; the big ones lead us to expect a full

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utterance—the whole story—but they don't deliver. The enlarged field of vision has the effect of distancing us from the action. We end up feeling like outsiders.

Woodman seems to believe a bigger work necessitates a bigger cast of characters. In truth, his largest reliefs—the frieze-like *Peaceable Kingdom* and *Carnival*—have less story than some of his smallest. When Woodman attempts a major statement his work loses its sardonic edge; he goes softly humanistic. *Peaceable Kingdom,* with its musicians, juggler, dancer, lion, tiger, dog, and lambs, is, like its namesakes by Edward Hicks, a group portrait. You are meant to focus on the individual figures and on the power of love that has brought all these different types together. But Woodman's folk-artish simplifications lack the pungency of characterization we know from Hicks and other great folk artists. Since the figures aren't particularized, the proposed union of opposites isn't made especially compelling. *Carnival,* with its costumed revelers, sounds another cheerful theme with deep undertones, but the drama of masks and make-believe fails to emerge. The revelers aren't individuals, nor are they grouped meaningfully. They don't add up. *Carnival* looks like it might be based on impressions of the famous Greenwich Village Halloween parades, in which participants wear intricate, crazy costumes. If this is the case, Woodman has missed the vital structure of those parades—of all parades: their processional movement. If Woodman considered steering all his revelers in one direction, I think I know why he decided not to. He was afraid a seven-foot-long relief of ten figures, all moving one way, would feel drastically unbalanced. He'd have been right, too, because in his big reliefs, which one can't take in at a glance, the surrounding white wall no longer functions as a natural framing device. Woodman can't work up an atmosphere in the big works because the space isn't containable. What drama there is becomes overblown, then diffused.

In Woodman's bigger works you feel that he's trying to give his feathery-light aluminum materials and off-beat themes the heft to span large spaces; he's tired of being the smart kid going snip-snip with the metal shears. But there's a sense of strain; the tinkerer hasn't found the gizmo that will get him moving again. *Rescue,* the one large work in Woodman's recent show that came off to a degree, was also the one with an architectural frame: the brick facade of the building off which a young woman was hanging by her fingers (an accident? a suicide?) hemmed in the drama from below. The use of architecture to define space in *Rescue* points to sources in Donatello—especially Donatello's late reliefs for the Epistle pulpit in San Lorenzo in Florence (1465), which have bizarrely projected architectural settings. The figures in those particular Donatellos (at least when they're seen in reproduction) have an anonymity that might be congenial to Woodman; but Woodman has never attempted an architectural space that's complex—or fraught with psychological implications—in the manner of those Donatellos. The Donatello reliefs suggest a world where human actions are dominated by a drama of pure architectonic form. For Woodman, who seems to be pressing against the limits of anecdotal composition, the next step may be to give his actors a better-defined stage.

Barbara Goodstein's reliefs are mostly smaller than Woodman's; some of her best terra-cottas aren't more than a foot high. They don't, though, feel at all like miniatures or tasty decorative morsels. Goodstein doesn't work small because it feels cosier. There's a deliberation to the way she distills figures from combinations of abstract forms, and this gives her reliefs an impact that belies their literal dimensions. The note of toughness—almost of intransigence—in Goodstein's art was struck right on the announcement for her last show, where she reproduced *Three Graces,* her version of the Hellenistic theme of three women in contrapposto poses, arms intertwined, viewed front-back-front. This was the most peculiar Three Graces I'd ever seen, for on first view-

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ing the figures seemed rather awkward. One felt that if they did personify the idea of grace, this must be some new form of grace—certainly not the soft, yielding kind Raphael offers in his variations on the antique motif. Goodstein's Graces are drawn with rough pats and slaps of white plaster on a black board; this is low, highly pictorial relief—virtually a three-dimensional drawing. The Three Graces have little dash feet or no feet at all; their bodies rise up in a succession of globs of plaster that suggest legs, thighs, hips, shoulders, bits of drapery. The heads are faceless loops. Each element seems an increment in some ethic of difficulty—nothing's obvious or ingratiating or pretty. But as you contemplate these elements they begin to connect and converse with one another. Though no single element feels easy, there's an achievement of ease. The awkward pieces flow together; the sum of the parts is a *state* of grace.

Three Graces is just over a foot wide, yet it pulls you in and it holds you. *Figure Turning* is sixteen inches high, a size that in Goodstein's world suggests a certain monumentality. Like many Goodsteins, *Figure Turning* has to do with movement; it's an investigation of the figure's journey through space, expressed not in terms of anatomical engineering but in terms of shapes and successions of shapes that analogize movement. In *Figure Turning* you register a sharp, bulky angle against a long, slow curve; a rough agitated surface against a smooth one. Thrusts, counterthrusts. Because Goodstein describes few specific body parts, she leaves much for you, the viewer, to figure out. Her art has those mysterious lacunae of modern art; those uncharted, ambiguous regions viewers have to map on their own. In *Figure Turning* a slab is a thigh—or a skirt—one doesn't quite know. Goodstein isn't, however, running us in circles the way many who claim to build on the modern past really do; what she's left out—what she's evasive about—is a matter of careful calculation. The rather anonymous, abstracted body parts in *Figure Turning* and so many other Goodstein sculptures serve to locate the figures in a special imaginary world. *Dancer Forming the Shape of a Heart, Woman Washing, Figure Seen from the Back,* and *Figure Turning* are denizens of a rare, charged universe; the distance we feel between these figures and our reality suggests a classicist's reserve.

Back in the 1950s, when many artists were working, as Goodstein seems to be, somewhere between pure representation and abstraction, descriptive terms like "semi-abstract" and "abstract landscape" were much in vogue. While no one has used these phrases in an art magazine in ages, the last few years have seen an upsurge of work that falls into the same old categories. Now, as then, most semi-abstractions have an equivocal, evasive feel to them. When you look at the great semi-abstractions of the first part of the century—those of Matisse and Klee, for instance—you feel a new territory has been claimed for art; in the semi-abstractions of more recent years—even the better ones, such as De Kooning's first Women and Diebenkorn's early Ocean Park paintings—its more like a so-so piece of landscape gardening, where there are nice patches but basically everything has been put in any which way, just as long as it fits. Goodstein has found a place for herself in that difficult middle distance between representation and abstraction.

In the sharp qualitative leap between Goodstein's first show, in 1982, and her 1984 show, I can measure the stages of a journey. The elements haven't changed, they're just living together on happier terms. I no longer feel, as I did three years ago, that the reductiveness stands in the way of the figures. Goodstein has held to a difficult course and reached port. She now carries her work, with reliefs like *Woman with a Big Heart* and *Two Sides of the Story,* into the precincts of metaphor and abstraction. *Woman with a Big Heart* is just what the title says: a woman so full of heart that her entire torso is taken up with a large, valentine-shaped organ. *Two Sides of the Story* is a pure abstraction of rough and smooth branches that form a delicate, contrapuntal argument

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as they extend in opposite directions from a central, trunk-like form. These works seem a natural evolution from the more normative figures, probably because they uphold what is for Goodstein the central fact of the figure: its bilateral symmetry. In laying out a fairly traditional early modernist path somewhere between representation and abstraction, Goodstein has reclaimed a bit of the old modernist sense of purpose. With *Woman with a Big Heart* and *Two Sides of the Story* she steps into Paul Klee land. I can't imagine a much happier place for an artist to be.

Though modesty is a human rather than an aesthetic value, it may have a tactical usefulness for certain artists at certain times. The small scale of many of Woodman's and Goodstein's reliefs, combined with the cheapness and inventiveness of their materials —the rivets, the plywood—makes a light, slightly mocking extra-aesthetic comment on the inflationary spiral of today's art. This inflation is nowhere clearer than in sculpture, which is in the midst of a new Age of Bronze. There have been shows and articles devoted to the resurgence of bronze casting among both abstract and representational artists; the switch back to traditional materials is presented as a new prosperity—like an upswing in sales of diamonds or natural pearls. Sculptors always talk about how expensive bronze is; to use it proclaims a certain success. Some even evoke the affluence of bronze without actually using it, by constructing forms with a bulk and a density that says, "Good old bronze." Tom Otterness's *Old World,* a row of rotund figures which was the first thing you saw as you got off the elevator at the Whitney Biennial this spring, is plaster but might as well be bronze. It's just waiting for the angel who'll fork up the money for the casting; Otterness's other contribution to the Biennial, *Head,* has already made it into bronze.

Otterness makes slippery, curved forms. *Head* is a veritable mask. The circle eyes, clear brow, and straight nose spell classicism, but a classicism so generalized as to be generic. *Old World* consists of eight lumpy people out of Botero's paintings who doff their hats and expose their private parts, to what purpose I don't know. Otterness's work has no resonance whatsoever; but there's something about it even more disturbing than the bland surfaces and staged ambiguities. Otterness projects an armor-plated self-confidence that intimidates viewers. In this my-art-right-or-wrong attitude he reminds me of Robert Longo, whose enormous wall works also combine big-city anonymity, pop eroticism, and (sometimes) elements cast in bronze. Otterness and Longo don't mean to affect you but to paralyze you—these artists leave viewers wiped out, de-personalized. The Art Deco element in Otterness and Longo gives their work its swank, neo-fascist look.

Deco was the perfect fascist style, because its symmetries and its impersonality offered a modern-age remake of the old, imperial ideal of art. As many neo-classicists of the 1920s and 1930s were quick to recognize, the combination of narrative elements and Deco cool could create a curiously sedated form of humanism. A low hum of feeling relieves the debilitating ennui of mechanized, do-not-touch forms. One senses this low hum in Martin Silverman's figures, which have been shown in the past five years at the Hamilton and Edward Thorp galleries. Silverman's work attaches to the suave, heroic bronze tradition, only he shows a wit in his dancing couples, children, and lovers, that makes me feel sure they were done by a human being. Silverman's figurative sculpture (I'm told he's now working abstractly) suggests an effort to relate to the surrounding space, and his subjects have a gentle humanity that makes one think of Elie Nadelman. Standing before Silverman's sculpture one is conscious of certain qualities, but one is overwhelmed by questions of how good it is, what it's related to. This is the burden of academic art: to create works that we always experience in relation to something else, to the past.

Timothy Woodman and his tin snippers may remind you of Calder; Barbara Goodstein's figures, with their Tanagra-like scale,

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may recall Nadelman's little idols. But when you're in front of Woodman's and Goodstein's work you don't feel you're taking a backward glance. These artists aren't hung up on some distant past when sculpture was the shining glory of the West; they connect to this time, the present, when sculptors are the odd artists out. If Woodman's show at Zabriskie, with its separate, piquant incidents, gave us a jumpy, newsreel-collage composed of slices of life, Goodstein's show suggested something more like a dance of life. Ranged around the well-proportioned, rectangular space of the Bowery Gallery in SoHo, her figures formed a frieze that took as its central impulse the odd, often awkward rhythms of modern times. We're all so used to walking out of galleries feeling depleted and depressed, it's now practically a miracle to leave a show just feeling buoyed up, encouraged. Woodman and Goodstein —with their quirkiness, their willingness to take the dare—fill needs you may not quite remember that you had.

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Books

The "superfluous man"

by Joseph Frank

Alexander Herzen is best known as the author of *My Past and Thoughts,* those sparkling memoirs which are, as Sir Isaiah Berlin has rightly said, one of the finest depictions of progressive and radical European politics in the mid-nineteenth century, as well as being of a literary quality equal to the greatest Russian novels. Herzen was an incomparable observer and a wittily skeptical and ironical writer (he was often called the Russian Voltaire); he was also at the center of Russian cultural life as a young man. Later, in European exile, he became a figure of international renown after setting up the first free Russian press in London, founding the weekly journal *Kólokol (The Bell),* which served as the voice of liberal opinion in his stifled homeland, and also turning out a series of works (mainly in the form of imaginary dialogues with or letters to friends and adversaries) which have lost none of their freshness and force as commentaries on the key issues that still plague modern civilization. Herzen's writings combine aristocratic asperity toward bourgeois values (he was, even if illegitimate, the son of an extremely wealthy Russian nobleman and had been educated as such) with democratic aspirations toward liberty, equality, and social justice. The two elements form an extremely attractive and highly individual compound, and give Herzen a unique perspective on the modern world.

As a young man, Herzen tried his hand at *belles lettres* and wrote a novel, *Who Is to Blame?,* which has occupied an important place in Russian literature ever since.[1] It was written in the mid-1840s, in the days of what was called the Natural School of young Russian writers, a group whose members were all supposed to have come out of Gogol's *The Overcoat.* This meant that they were carrying on the humanitarian appeal contained in that short story as well as in Gogol's satirical masterpiece *Dead Souls. Who Is to Blame?,* with its withering account of the corruption, cruelty, and stupefying spiritual stagnation of life in the Russian provinces, is more indebted to the novel than to the story, which is set in St. Petersburg. And while Herzen lacks the madcap grotesquerie that allowed Gogol to create his gallery of monumental monsters, his version of Russian mores is perhaps even more depressing because his people are closer to being ordinary human beings. They are even, on occasion, capable of making generous gestures.

At the center of *Who Is to Blame?* is a romantic dilemma involving the sacredness of the marriage bond. The first part of the book deals with the meeting and marriage of two unhappy souls, Lyubonka Negrov, the illegitimate daughter of a landowner by one of his serfs, and Dmitri Krutsifersky, the son of a provincial doctor living in desperate

1 *Who Is to Blame?* was recently published by Cornell University Press (293 pages, $32.50); translated, annotated, and introduced by Michael R. Katz.

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poverty. As a young boy, Krutsifersky attracts the favorable attention of a passing notable and is thus enabled to study at Moscow University. One of Herzen's alter egos, Doctor Krupov, then obtains a post for Krutsifersky as a tutor at the Negrovs. Dr. Krupov, who appears in other works by Herzen, is the spokesman for a disillusioned, materialistic view of life, a view closed to any sort of romanticism or idealism and filled with a resigned pessimism; but Dr. Krupov always strives to behave decently, honorably, and justly within the limited range of the possible. Lyubonka and Krutsifersky fall in love and decide to marry, with the blessing of Negrov, who is only too glad to get Lyubonka off his hands without a dowry. But Dr. Krupov is filled with trepidation and warns Krutsifersky that Lyubonka is really a powerful personality ("she is a young tigress, as yet unaware of her strength") while he is "as sentimental as a German maiden." The marriage takes place all the same, with this premonition of disaster hanging over its head from the very start.

Herzen is not really a novelist, and makes no attempt to tell a story in any conventional sense. His chapters are a series of essayistic sketches, obviously related in style to his later autobiography, which expositorily paint in the social background and the character traits of his people; there are very few dramatic scenes in which the action comes to life. Herzen writes what he calls the "biographies" of his characters, and remarks rather proudly, in his role as narrator, that "I never avoid biographical digressions." So after recounting the story of Lyubonka and Krutsifersky his attention shifts from them entirely for a number of chapters and focuses on the history of Vladimir Beltov, the first of the famous "superfluous men" who fill the pages of the Russian novel in the 1840s and whose type reaches its apogee in the threadbare splendor of Stepan Trofimovich Verkhovensky of Dostoevsky's *The Devils*.

Beltov himself is the scion of a wealthy landowning family of the region whose mother had been born a serf; his father had unexpectedly married her as a gesture of repentance for previous mistreatment. Herzen is highly critical of the education given Beltov by his adoring mother, who hires one of those irreproachable and impossible Swiss tutors one finds in Russian novels—full of Protestant uprightness and Plutarchian civic virtue—to instill Beltov with noble precepts and inspire him with ideals totally unsuited to Russian life. As a result, though Beltov enters the Russian civil service full of zeal to help his countrymen, he soon retreats before the quagmire of injustice, cupidity, and sheer animal cunning that he encounters; he then occupies himself with various substitutes—medicine, painting—which he quickly abandons because they do not satisfy his real need. As Herzen makes clear, this real need is the possibility of some form of fruitful and beneficent political activity. "Nothing in the world is so enticing to an ardent nature as a role in current affairs, history-in-the-making. Anyone who has once harbored such dreams within his breast has spoiled himself for all other activities." Here Herzen is undoubtedly speaking for himself and predicting his own career.

It was the Swiss tutor, Monsieur Joseph, who had implanted such dreams in the bosom of his pupil, and thus unfitted him for life in Russia—or anywhere else. Beltov, after the usual fruitless wanderings through Europe of the Russian "superfluous man" seeking ways to escape his "spleen," accidentally encounters his tutor again and decides to make a final, absurd attempt to realize his ambition: he will return home and run for the purely ceremonial office of marshal of the nobility. But his fellow nobles cordially despise this Europeanized wastrel and wanderer, and he never stands a chance. Dr. Krupov incautiously introduces him to the Krutsiferskys, he and Lyubonka recognize each other as kindred souls unable to adapt to the ignoble mediocrity of their surroundings, and the inevitable occurs: malicious gossip starts up and reaches the ears of the tenderhearted and hapless husband. Lyubonka wastes away after a single passionate

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kiss from Beltov, torn between her new love and her pity for the suffering Krutsifersky. The book ends with Beltov escaping once again to a life of boredom and futility in Europe, with Lyubonka "declining rapidly" and Krutsifersky "overcome with grief," drinking and praying to God. It is a new version of the ending of *Eugene Onegin,* but renunciation is no longer a triumphant vindication of duty over inclination and passion; it is a sacrifice that dooms all concerned to despair and death.

Ever since the publication of *Who Is to Blame?* the question posed by the title has elicited a flood of commentary, and Michael Katz, a professor of Russian at the University of Texas in Austin, outlines the various alternatives in his introduction to this edition. Russian criticism, particularly since the 1860s, has stressed the social morass depicted by Herzen as being ultimately responsible; and there is certainly ample evidence to make such an emphasis plausible. The numberless, almost inevitable, cruelties arising from the master-serf relation; the complete lack of the most elementary liberties; the hopelessness of affecting any important change for the better—all these are driven home by Herzen relentlessly and can hardly be ignored. But Herzen was not a determinist, and he also believed that human beings had a hand in creating their own fate.

For all his sympathy for Beltov, Herzen nonetheless treats him with much the same irony with which he indicts the Negrovs and the other unenlightened denizens of the province. When Beltov reaches for a copy of Byron's "Don Juan" instead of occupying himself, as he had originally intended, with "an English pamphlet on Adam Smith," Herzen makes clear that his hero is more concerned with distraction than instruction. And Dr. Krupov sharply tells Beltov that, if he is bored by the idleness of his life, it is because he has never had to earn his bread. This is exactly the home truth that would cause the radical critics of the 1860s to regard the "superfluous men" (among whom they now included Herzen himself) as unworthy of even a moment's sympathy or concern. Herzen does not see Beltov and the others *only* as helpless victims of their environment; and this has caused some American scholars, reacting against the Russian emphasis, to answer the question of the book's title by stressing the characters' own responsibility.

Michael Katz believes that neither extreme is faithful to the novel, and this is my own opinion as well. What makes the book more than a tract for its time is precisely the many-sidedness of Herzen's understanding of the Russian dilemma, and his refusal to offer any easy answers. But there is no question about where his sympathies lie—with all those, like Beltov, Lyubonka, Krutsifersky, and Dr. Krupov, who are unable to reconcile themselves emotionally with the injustices existing around them and who remain faithful to some vision of a better and happier world in which much of what Herzen castigates would cease to exist. For all his skepticism about Beltov, Herzen's attitude is clearly indicated in a key passage: "in spite of the maturity of his thought, he [Beltov] was not really an adult. In a word, now, more than thirty years since his birth, he was *just getting ready* to begin his life, like a sixteen-year-old boy, without noticing that the door that had been gradually opening was not the one through which gladiators enter but the one through which their bodies are carried out. 'Of course, Beltov himself is to blame for much of this.' I am in complete agreement with you, while others think that there are people whose faults are better than any virtues." Herzen is of course one of these "others," and he could both judge Beltov lucidly and find his "faults," which stem from his unfulfilled political idealism, to be superior to the virtues of others. One encounters a good deal of this same feeling in Chekhov's portrayal of his idealists, the good men who, as Nabokov said, could never make good.

Although the romantic intrigue of *Who Is to Blame?* may seem secondary, at first sight, to the social-political theme, it actually adds an element of complexity to Herzen's vision.

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At this time Herzen was under the influence of the French Saint-Simonians, who preached "the rehabilitation of the flesh" and who had found a powerful literary spokesman in George Sand. Her works were immensely popular in Russia, and produced a spate of imitations, among which Herzen's novel is usually included. But while *Who Is to Blame?* has often been taken as a protest against the legal and religious shackles that bind unhappy people together in an unsuitable marriage, and while one can find statements in Herzen's diary recommending "free relations between the sexes," his novel does not avoid the moral difficulties that can arise when such ideas are put into practice.

Nobody, after all, is really to blame that Lyubonka is a more powerful personality than Krutsifersky, whom she married freely and out of love, or that she finds qualities of "genius" in Beltov, qualities her adoring and devoted husband lacks. For Beltov and Lyubonka to fulfill their ideal love, Krutsifersky would have to be ruthlessly sacrificed; but he has done nothing to deserve such a fate and Lyubonka is too fine a human being to throw him over without a qualm. Herzen knew that the human conscience had its imperatives which had little to do with the "rationality" of one or another social arrangement. When Herzen himself later discovered that his own wife was having an affair with a close friend, the radical poet George Herwegh, he was wounded to the depths of his being by the treachery involved, despite all his liberated ideas. It was because he could prophetically intuit such a response that his own book can still be taken seriously, and escapes the puerilities later enshrined in Chernyshevsky's *What Is to Be Done?,* where marriages are made and unmade with untroubled serenity and reduced simply to matters of mutual convenience.

The "superfluous man" as a literary type, at least in his gentry-liberal incarnation, began to go out of fashion in Russia during the 1860s. He made his last literary stand in Dostoevsky's *The Devils,* in the character of Stepan Trofimovich Verkhovensky. But while the social class from which the superfluous man came ceased to occupy the foreground of Russian literature, the social-cultural theme that he exemplified has continued to resurface. How was one to adapt to the ugly and seemingly immutable realities of Russian life without losing one's soul? The radicals replied by engaging in a heroic and self-sacrificing battle against the political regime. They saw this regime as the source of all evil; its elimination, they were firmly convinced, would solve the problem once and for all—especially since the soul was in any case a bourgeois illusion. But it is astonishing to observe, despite the enormous changes that have occurred in Russia since Herzen wrote, that a descendant of Beltov, with all his weakness, capriciousness, irresolution, and idealism, turns up as the hero of what is arguably the greatest Russian novel of our time—*Dr. Zhivago.* Yuri Zhivago combines elements of Beltov's character with the profession of Dr. Krupov, and is a poet as well, who continues to uphold the values of the spirit (including religion) in a world fashioned by the descendants of all those who fought so tenaciously to rid Russian culture of every trace of reverence for the "superfluous man." The same tyranny and suffocating oppression that produced the "superfluous man" once did so again, and he has lost none of his aura or his symbolic value as a clue to Russian realities.

No forgetting

Natalia Ginzburg All Our Yesterdays. Translated from the Italian by Angus Davidson. Carcanet, 300 pages, $14.95

reviewed by James Gardner

Like so many Italian writers of her generation, Natalia Ginzburg has found her most enduring inspiration in the fact of the Second World War, as well as in its causes and consequences. Mrs. Ginzburg, who was born in 1916, began writing in the early Thirties, and her first book, *La strada che va*

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in città, was published in 1942. Those Neo-Realist contemporaries with whom she is most to be compared are novelists like Italo Calvino and Vasco Pratolini, as well as Italian film directors like Roberto Rossellini and Vittorio De Sica. Though Neo-Realism was more of a trend or tendency than anything as clearly defined as a movement, the novels it included usually drew upon incidents from the war years, and they attempted to capture something of their native Italy in very human, but always direct and unprettified, form. Even the humor and distance that often mark Ginzburg's style have their equivalents in De Sica films like *Miracle in Milan,* with its taste for broad characterization and earthy humor, and her novels share with *Umberto D* and *The Bicycle Thief* that limitless commiseration with all forms of victimization.

At one point in her collection of autobiographical sketches, *Mai devi domandarmi,* Natalia Ginzburg asserts that, "Anyone who writes runs two risks: the risk of being too kind and tolerant with oneself, and the risk of being too hard on oneself." Though it must be stated from the beginning that Mrs. Ginzburg manages successfully to steer a middle course by applying to herself the same indulgent if cautious humanity she shows for the rest of the species, it is interesting that there is a question that is being begged here: whether self-confession is the sole or even the primary form that creative writing can take. The answer to this, of course, must be in the negative. Autobiographical writing isn't by any means the only literary procedure that can or should be practiced, nor are there any compelling reasons for considering it somehow more honest or interesting than any other.

But her statement reveals a great deal about Mrs. Ginzburg's own writing, in addition to the fact that her fiction is so often autobiographical. In presupposing that writers will always be discussing themselves, she also assumes what is by no means obvious, that it will be the writer's natural inclination to pass judgment. As might be expected, the paradigm here enunciated once again fits Mrs. Ginzburg perfectly. In addition to finding enough of the world within the few city blocks around her to keep her busy writing through the years, passing judgment upon herself and her world comes as naturally to Mrs. Ginzburg as describing it. Paradoxically, the judgment she passes seems usually a fairly benign one, and makes so many concessions to human frailty that it might seem as though she abstains from judging her fellow men. But the fact remains that the category that is constantly being applied in her fiction is a very judgmental one, and it is this centripetal impulse that preserves her art from becoming too aesthetic, and from losing contact with that tumultuous past in which she, together with all the other Italians of her age, has shared.

The present novel, *All Our Yesterdays (Tutti i nostri ieri),* whose English translation has just been reissued, was first published in 1952, and represents a crystallization of Mrs. Ginzburg's reactions to the war. Her husband, Leone Ginzburg, who was arrested by the Germans, died under torture, and though Mrs. Ginzburg has subsequently remarried, she has continued to use his name in commemoration. The milieu in which this novel takes place is that of the Italian middle class, and there would seem to be a good deal of Mrs.Ginzburg's own experience in her evocation of the time and place. Perhaps like her own father, who was a professor, the father of the mercurial girl Concettina is the sort of intellectual who enjoys philosophizing on a variety of subjects. He reserves his most devoted labors for a book of memoirs he is writing secretly about the fascists, while gloating to think how embarrassed all the people named in the book will become when it is published, once the fascists have fallen from power. Though *All Our Yesterdays* begins with the family visiting the grave of their mother, the role of maternity, which Ginzburg treated more definitively in a later novel, *Sagittario,* is filled by the housekeeper, Signora Maria, a fairly ridiculous concierge of an old woman who is forever butting into other people's business. But with the exception of

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these two adults, of whom the former dies off early, and also of the family friend Cenzo Rena, who occupies a good deal of the second half of the book, most of the characters in *All Our Yesterdays* are adolescents, whose skewed visions of the world are violently intruded upon, but not destroyed, by the enormities of the Nazis and fascists. These children, the offspring of the anti-fascist writer, and also the children of the well-to-do family across the street, are depicted with the same sympathy that Ginzburg applies to all her characters. She seems to have remembered very well each element of the adolescent psyche, and all the uncertainties and vanity entailed in growing up. The poignancy of much of her characterization of these young people consists in her refusal to allow the war to turn them too suddenly into adults. Nor does she seem to suggest that there is any compelling necessity that they ever grow up, especially in a world like hers, in which the adults so often act like children. These children experience—in addition to the hardships of war—the death of a father and the suicide of a brother, while the girls, Concettina among them, become involved in misalliances. Yet somehow it would seem central to Ginzburg's understanding of the universe that these young men and women be able to undergo all the tribulations and incommodities of the war, in the process to engage in feats of mature conscience, and, furthermore, to triumph over unimaginable hardships, without losing, in the midst of this conflagration, that disarming imbecility of infants, and without emerging after the war in any state of self-evident maturity. When, at the end of the novel, Giustino and his sister, the recently widowed Anna, are reunited with Emmanuele from across the street, it is as children that they go forth into the world again, as baffled as ever.

In one of its artistic ambitions, *All Our Yesterdays* aspires, though with less success, to that great achievement in *War and Peace* whereby Tolstoy, to a greater degree than anyone prior to Joyce, managed to enter into the mind of each of his characters and to see and feel everything in such perfect accordance with the person he inhabits that what resulted was a work of unsurpassed psychological penetration. Similarly, in Mrs. Ginzburg's case, although we are never allowed actually to enter into the minds of the characters, and though we see them from the outside only, she still describes not what they are doing, but what they think they are doing; only the circumstances are permitted to give the lie to their pretensions. To be sure, there are literary differences as well: Tolstoy is extending from within the boundaries of the nineteenth-century novel, by applying with greater consistency the psychological methods of Dickens and Stendhal. Ginzburg, on the other hand, is working within the context of the modern novel rather than that of the nineteenth century, and her psychological approach is a distillation of, and variation upon, the influence of such writers as Joyce and Virginia Woolf.

The result of this technique is perhaps the psychological accuracy but not the penetration of Tolstoy, and by trying to compromise between the realities of the interior and exterior worlds, without remaining true to either, Mrs. Ginzburg, with her omniscient and impersonal narrator, does not always stay clear of mannerism or monotony. *All Our Yesterdays* is unquestionably a more engaging novel than the dour *Caro Michele,* which she would go on to write, yet it shares with that work, which was of the epistolary genre, a certain sluggish consistency, entailed in the desire that the work should be all of a piece. I think she fares ultimately better in some of her other early fiction like those stories included in *La strada che va in città,* and *Sagittario,* which are written in the first person with far greater liveliness and conviction.

The translation of *All Our Yesterdays,* though a bit dated since it first appeared in 1956, is a fairly effective rendering of the original, even if the text it had to work with was not as inspired in its language as other works that Mrs. Ginzburg wrote before and since.

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Bellini's drawings

Jacopo Bellini The Louvre Album of Drawings. Text by Bernhard Degenhart and Annegrit Schmitt. Translated from the German by Frank Mecklenburg. George Braziller, 29 pages, 119 plates, $80

reviewed by Creighton Gilbert

The notebooks of Jacopo Bellini, the early Renaissance Venetian painter, confront art historians with one of their peskiest examples of the problem of trying to explain what a work of art is all about. In Bellini's case the problem is often resolved by not bringing it up at all. That option will be more difficult following this attractive publication of *The Louvre Album of Drawings.* Heretofore this notebook and the second one, in the British Museum, could be studied only in very limited selections or in two rare deluxe facsimile editions, published some seventy years ago. Fragility has rightly limited access to the originals. Other factors, too, have made it possible to get away with silence about them. The most obvious is that Bellini's paintings are mostly lost, so that we are not often faced with the part of his work that would normally provide our main access to him. Drawings generally are looked at, except by the most devoted specialists, as annexes to the rest of an artist's work. Another factor is Jacopo's position as the father and father-in-law of two great painters, Giovanni Bellini and Mantegna, not to mention his other son Gentile, a remarkable and quite visible painter. Since Jacopo has impressed us less actively, it has been easy to tag him with the pathetic or awkward role of a Leopold Mozart, and leave it at that. It is quite true that his paternal status is significant, and the notebooks are linked directly to this factor. His widow in her will named them as her sons' inheritance. They were piously guarded heirlooms, at least until Gentile let this one go to his patron the Sultan in Constantinople. But they were also the carriers of instruction and ideas.

When comment is made on the notebooks, it is most often about their use of perspective. Many of the drawings are elaborations of architectural fantasy, confidently offering systems of engineering that are quite unreasonable; the one best parallel perhaps is Piranesi's prisons, three hundred years later. (Piranesi found his main inspiration in north Italian stage sets, so he is indeed in direct descent from Jacopo.) Both artists make their architectural views show an emotional tone, though Jacopo does this by giving them human inhabitants. They are often very small and numerous. Jacopo may have invented the visual approach to the world in which the single visual field is treated as basic, the human actors in it being just as incidental as anything else. This Venetian approach, which contrasted with the dualistic figure-space balance of the dominant Florentine Renaissance in Jacopo's time and later, grew through the atmospheric vitalism of Titian and others to be a primary pictorial language, as long as resemblance to the world was assumed. (The Impressionists are even sometimes credited with creating it.)

Drawing scholars have been especially fascinated by one of Jacopo's methods along this line, seen here most easily in the drawings on double-page spreads. Again and again one page contains all that is needed to illustrate the religious narrative, and even to give it a nice centralized composition, while the other page simply extends the space, showing no human figures, or at least none with name roles. This one-sided design is basic in some of the most famous works of Jacopo's successors, such as Giovanni Bellini's *St. Francis* and Giorgione's *Three Philosophers.* A drawing here by Jacopo of St. Francis not only uses this spatial scheme but even anticipates his son in the little stream that flows out to the front, intended to make us accept the continuum between the picture space and ours. Another drawing, in its extreme foreshortening, is the basis for Mantegna's famous *Dead Christ.* It is a large scene of the Raising of the Cross. While the other two crosses are upright, Christ's is on

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the ground, in perspective like a plank in a floor, and he is being nailed to it. In another case of heroes being immersed in the sweep of space a social commentary is suggested. A big procession includes Christ carrying the cross; it is all in the middle distance, with smaller figures in front. Jacopo often makes us hunt for the star, in the way we know best from Breughel a century later. But here, unusual for Jacopo, the people in the foreground are people at work who are ignoring Christ. Some, but not all, suggest that they symbolize the pagan world.

Despite all this inventiveness, the drawings also give support to those who have tended to ignore them. The figures are, after all, a bit formulaic and stiff; the scenes have fascination but not a strong emotive expressiveness or feel of life. Jacopo was fertile in ideas, but not a great executant. He was indeed the teacher and father. His somewhat schematic neatness may be appreciated most happily, perhaps, if considered as an effective way to explicate his ideas and motifs. Later artists achieved a like purpose by publishing books with woodcuts, like Dürer, or even more like Palladio, an equally powerful teacher across the centuries.

A scattering of other artists' notebooks survives from the same time as Jacopo's, but they are totally different. Some belong to a well-demonstrated medieval tradition in which artists drew copies after works of art they saw, in order to have the motifs handy later. These correspond to artists' scrapbooks of magazine clippings today, a very common phenomenon but one little taken into account. Others are true sketchbooks, practicing on problems. But Jacopo's are plainly neither: they are original, and they are fully finished. Most of the two hundred are entirely compositions, as complex as only the few most elaborate paintings of the time. Most that are not correspond to parts of these compositions, as close-ups.

The editors of *The Louvre Album of Drawings* call them "works of art in themselves." This is true as to technique, but worrisome. We have no other such notebooks from Jacopo's century, not even single drawings that could be called independent works of art, making it doubtful that this kind of thing existed. We may think of Jacopo giving an amazing proportion of his time to instructing his sons by example in some of the most intricate tasks they would face, as Bach did. Yet it may also well be that Jacopo intended a larger audience. If the notebooks of other artists of the time are like modern scrapbooks, his perhaps are like modern portfolios. Through them he could quickly show a client—and how could he have resisted doing so even if he had not so purposed at first?—all his skills, his virtuosity with perspective, and various options, simple and complicated, for the same religious illustration. Nearly all the drawings do illustrate standard subjects, which is more understandable through this reading than if they were private technical drawings. Student drawings of the period, which are very common, show a concern unlike what we have here.

At any rate, Jacopo's obscurity seems to be ending. At least two other projects for books presenting these drawings are reported to be under way. This one has very good-looking illustrations, along with a skimpy text. The book can be highly recommended for the essential purpose of letting us see vividly a very original artist.

The war according to Sartre

Jean-Paul Sartre The War Diaries of Jean-Paul Sartre: November 1939-March 1940. Edited by Arlette Elkaïm-Sartre. Translated by Quentin Hoare. Pantheon, 366 pages, $17.95

reviewed by Roger Kimball

Jean-Paul Sartre was thirty-four years old when Germany attacked Poland on September 1, 1939. By that time, he had already published important philosophical works, including *The Transcendence of the Ego,* and was

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beginning to develop a reputation for his fiction: *La Nausée,* which many consider his finest novel, had been published by *NRF* the previous year, followed by *Le Mur* and a collection of critical essays. Having done his military service a decade before in the meteorological corps, Sartre suddenly found himself torn away from his self-possessed life as a teacher and writer, and was engaged once again as an army weatherman. "I was quite comfortably ensconced in my situation as an individualist, anti-bourgeois writer," he recalled later in "Self-Portrait at Seventy."

> What exploded all that was the fact that one fine day in September 1939 I received a call-up paper, and was obliged to go off to the barracks at Nancy to meet fellows I didn't know who'd been called up like me. That's what introduced the social into my life . . . . Up till then I believed myself sovereign; I had to encounter the negation of my own freedom—through being mobilized—in order to become aware of the weight of the world . . . .

But as his first response to life was always to write about it, Sartre did not abandon literary activities in his new situation; the world had not become that weighty. Immediately after he was called up, he conceived the idea of keeping a journal. "Reflecting upon the world of war and its nature," he wrote to Simone de Beauvoir, "I hatched the project of writing a journal. Please include in your parcel a stout black notebook —thick but not too tall or wide, cross-ruled of course."

In fact, Sartre discovered that his new routine afforded him even more time to write than he had had in civilian life. The change of scene and the portentous atmosphere of the times seemed to act as a tonic to his imagination. Stationed just behind the front in a succession of small towns near Strasbourg, Sartre had the sense of being close to great happenings but endured very few actual distractions. His duties, which consisted mostly of taking weather readings, were neither taxing nor time-consuming, and he was usually left to his own devices.

Still, however propitious the situation, Sartre's productivity in the five months that he was writing these notebooks was staggering. To begin with, he managed to fill fourteen notebooks and begin a fifteenth. Of these, it appears that only the five that are translated here—numbers III, V, XI, XII, and XIV—have survived. Arlette Elkaïm-Sartre, the philosopher's mistress in the late Fifties and later his adopted daughter and heir, hints in her foreword that other volumes may exist but have yet to resurface. In any case, in addition to the fourteen notebooks —the equivalent of over a thousand printed pages—he wrote hundreds of letters, most of his novel, *The Age of Reason,* and tinkered with several other literary projects. In his translator's introduction to *The War Diaries,* Quentin Hoare estimates that Sartre wrote a total of some one million words during this period.

Simply to have written a million words in five months is a remarkable feat; and it is all the more so in light of the generally high quality of Sartre's writing here and the complexity of the ideas with which he was dealing. The whole episode reminds us that sheer abundant energy is one of the marks of genius. Admonished by a colleague that he was working too hard, spending sixteen hours a day reading and writing, Sartre confesses to his notebook that he is flattered by the thought but scrupulously calculates that his true average was considerably less—a mere ten or eleven hours a day. And unlike his infamous spasm of productivity in 1958, when he almost killed himself writing *Critique of Dialectical Reason,* Sartre's accomplishments in 1939-40 would seem to have been unaided by ever-increasing doses of amphetamines.

As the original title of this book indicates (*Les Carnets de la drôle de guerre: Novembre 1939-Mars 1940*), what we have here are not really "war diaries" but notebooks of the "phoney war," that strange interregnum after France declared war on Germany in which French and German troops sat ensconced in their respective positions along the Alsatian border, eyeing each other with

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hostility but not fighting. Sartre never saw combat, and while his notebooks occasionally discuss the phenomenon of war, his reflections on the subject tend to be saturated with the kind of abstract, Hegelian logic that dissolves the exigencies of lived experience into a battle of purely conceptual antagonists. "War, when all's said and done," Sartre mused in one typical passage, "is a concrete idea that contains within itself its own destruction and that accomplishes this by an equally concrete dialectic . . . . The essence of war will be *realized* concretely the day war becomes impossible." How consoling would be the thought that war becomes what it really is only when it becomes impossible—if only the unfolding of its "concrete dialectic" weren't such a messy affair.

One instance of such messiness occurred in May, 1940, when the Germans abruptly put an end to the phoney war; they outflanked the "impregnable" Maginot Line and, in a matter of weeks, had occupied France. Sartre, incidentally, was taken prisoner in June as his company retreated before the German onslaught. He used his time in captivity to study Heidegger and to compose a good portion of what would become his major philosophical work, *Being and Nothingness* (1943). He was released the following year and returned to Paris, where he continued writing and was involved—tangentially, it seems—in the Resistance.

Mr. Hoare enthusiastically introduces these notebooks as a "masterpiece"—"without question . . . a marvellously successful work." But despite their great historical interest and the many memorable passages they contain, I'm afraid that a reading of the notebooks forces us to conclude that there is indeed some question about their success as a "work." For the whole is simply too desultory, sketchy, and uneven to merit Mr. Hoare's praise. Yet they surely are an extraordinary set of documents. And it is worth noting, too, that Sartre always assumed that they would be published one day. "I am giving myself short shrift in my little black notebook," he wrote to Simone de Beauvoir. "Whoever reads it after my death—for you will publish it only posthumously—will think I was a dreadful character, unless you accompany it with explanatory annotations of a kindly sort." De Beauvoir did not, alas, provide the requisite annotations—fascinating though they would have been—but a glance through the present volume enables one to appreciate the point of Sartre's veiled request.

Ostensibly the testimony of an "average" soldier caught up in the moment, these notebooks are in fact no more average than was Jean-Paul Sartre himself. Though they include something of an abridged chronicle of Sartre's life at this time—his observations on daily events, relations with his new-found army colleagues, his sundry amours—their chief interest is as a diary of his prodigious intellectual obsessions and the motivating sensibility that occasioned them.

In this respect, they offer us a glimpse into the mental workshop of one of the most fertile and influential philosophical minds of the century as it labored at the threshold of intellectual maturity. We see Sartre discovering, elaborating, reformulating themes that we have come to identify as distinctively Sartrean. Anyone familiar with the basic tenets of his particularly austere brand of existentialism will at once recognize that these notebooks exhibit the entire range of its defining preoccupations: the agonized struggle for authenticity, the insistence on absolute freedom and responsibility, rejection of any transcendent measure for values or morals, minute analyses of one's relations with other people, an ill-defined but powerful anti-conventional, anti-bourgeois stance ("You're all bourgeois," Sartre snaps at his colleagues near the beginning of the volume, "I wouldn't put myself out for bourgeois people")—in short, as Mr. Hoare rightly observes, they "both prefigure and map out the virtual entirety of the author's subsequent oeuvre."

Especially noteworthy from a philosophical point of view are the many passages that rehearse material that would come to occupy

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a central place in the argument of *Being and Nothingness.* For example, the notebooks contain lengthy and often quite technical discussions of the concept of Nothingness, the nature of the will, the problem of authenticity, the structure of consciousness, and other equally specialized matters. Some of these discussions recur almost verbatim in *Being and Nothingness*; often, though, we follow as Sartre gropes his way to a preliminary understanding and expression of his ideas. Given the level of abstraction at which *Being and Nothingness* proceeds, such drafts are welcome interpretive aids: their very hesitations and digressions often help to elucidate Sartre's more finished—and more intricate—argument in *Being and Nothingness.*[1]

Also of philosophical interest is Sartre's account of his debt to Husserl and Heidegger. Sartre had studied Husserl when he was in Berlin in 1931-33, and philosophically he is in many ways closer to Husserl's phenomenology, with its obvious roots in the Cartesian tradition, than he is to Heidegger. But temperamentally, as it were, Sartre has much more in common with Heidegger, who can probably be regarded as his major philosophical inspiration. He did not read Heidegger's major work, *Being and Time,* until a German soldier provided him with a copy when he was a prisoner of war. But by September, 1939, he was acquainted with *What is Metaphysics?* and other of Heidegger's works, and the existential twist that characterizes Heidegger's philosophy had already begun to exert a deep influence on his thinking.

In addition to indulging in such philosophical reflections, Sartre uses his notebooks to keep a running dialogue with his reading, quoting from and reflecting copiously on whatever he happens to be engaged with at the moment. Gide, Saint-Exupéry, Kierkegaard, Stendhal, Flaubert, Koestler, and Emil Ludwig's biography of Kaiser Wilhelm II figure prominently in these pages, as do a host of lesser characters. Gide and Stendhal already emerge as among Sartre's heroes, but Flaubert is severely criticized for inexact writing and stylistic poverty. "How clumsy and disagreeable it is," Sartre writes of *L'Éducation sentimentale.* "How silly that constant hesitation between stylization and realism in the dialogues and portrayals." He then devotes several pages to a detailed criticism of what he considers Flaubert's ineffective and cliché-ridden use of verbs.

Sartre regarded this period of his life as a time of transition—at one point he compares himself to a snake that has sloughed off its old skin—and his notebooks abound in the kind of autobiographical recollections and self-analyses that such moments are wont to elicit. (Autobiography, of course, became a speciality of Sartre's: *The Words,* his much admired exercise in the genre, won him the Nobel Prize in 1964—which, characteristically, he refused.) We learn, for example, that from an early age Sartre was convinced he would become a great writer, dowered with a "great writer's life, as it appears from books." And "as for the content of that life," he writes,

> it can be easily imagined: there were solitude and despair, passions, great undertakings, a long period of painful obscurity (though I slyly shortened it in my dreams, in order not to be too old when it ended), and then glory, with its retinue of admiration and love . . . . In a word, I'd have liked to be sure of becoming a great man later on, so as to be able to live my youth as a great man's youth . . . . [T]hough I couldn't be sure, I behaved as if I must become one—and was extremely conscious of being the young Sartre, in the same way that people speak of the young Berlioz or the young Goethe.

Various memoirs, especially those written by his friends, are at pains to declare Sartre's modesty and unpretentiousness; no doubt he was possessed of these virtues, though it clearly cannot be said that he lacked self-confidence.

1 For a lucid introduction to the intricacies of Sartre's argument, especially in *Being and Nothingness,* I refer the reader to Arthur C. Danto's *Jean-Paul Sartre* (The Viking Press, 1975).

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Sartre's political enthusiasms, which later bulked so large in his work and personality, show themselves in these notebooks only obliquely. He cites a contemporary critic, one Émile Bouvier, who was dubious about the likelihood of Sartre's becoming "a great novelist." "It is to be feared," Bouvier wrote, "lest . . . he may leave literature for philosophy, mysticism or social preaching." Sartre responded that he was "flabbergasted" by Bouvier's remark: "I'd never have believed that anyone would consign me to mysticism like that. And as for social preaching, M. Bouvier can set his mind at ease."

Sartre was of course correct about mysticism; but as for philosophy and social preaching—well, here Bouvier would seem to have been closer to the mark. Concerning the latter, for example, one thinks of Sartre's vigorous—indeed, preachy—denunciations of the United States after the war, his support of Soviet Russia during the last years of Stalin's reign, or the steady stream of political manifestos, pamphlets, and pronouncements that he issued in the Sixties and Seventies. Simone de Beauvoir's memoir of Sartre's last years is replete with instances of his efforts in this direction. Typical is a quotation she took from a preface Sartre wrote in 1972 for a book about Maoism in France: "With their anti-authoritarian praxis the Maoists show themselves as the only revolutionary force capable of adapting itself to the new forms of class war in the period of organized capitalism." Such passages are depressing not least because they reveal Sartre descending to the level of a callow street-corner polemicist.

The subject of Sartre's politics is a complicated one, fraught with heated verbiage and ideological posturing. Any sustained consideration of his views must feature *Critique of Dialectical Reason,* in which Sartre took issue with the extreme individualism of *Being and Nothingness* and his other earlier works. But what always seemed to matter above all to Sartre was maintaining his position as spokesman for whatever group was recognized as being to the left of the entrenched, institutionalized power structure, whether it be democratic, socialist, or Communist. This is an aspect of his social thought that did not change with *Critique of Dialectical Reason.* And in the end, it is difficult to disagree with Leszek Kolakowski's obvservation, in *Main Currents of Marxism,* that Sartre's "whole political activity was vitiated by a fear of being in the typical situation of an intellectual condemning events that he has no power to influence; in short, his ideology was that of a politician *manqué,* cherishing unfulfilled ambitions to be on the 'inside.'"

Perhaps the most telling contribution to our understanding of Sartre that these notebooks make is in the spectacle they provide of him transforming the fabric of his everyday life into material for philosophical reflection. For Sartre, life was essentially an agenda for reflection. No feeling, no sensitivity, no impression is left unencumbered by interpretation; no interpretation is left undisciplined by further scrutiny. Not even the humble struggle against corpulence is exempt from elaborate speculative embroidery. "Every four or five months," Sartre writes, "I look at my stomach and get unhappy." Yet having then resolved to abstain from bread and wine, he finds himself tempted by a carafe of wine one day at lunch:

> But, precisely, if Nothingness is introduced into the world through man, anguish at Nothingness is simply anguish at freedom, or if you prefer, freedom's anguish at itself. If, for example, I experienced a slight anguish yesterday before the wine which I *could* but *should not* drink, it's because the "I shouldn't" was already in the past . . . and *nothing* could prevent me from drinking. It was before that particular *nothing* I was so anguished; that nothingness of my past's means of acting on my present . . . . [*N*]*othing* allows me to foresee what I shall do and, even if I were able to foresee it, *nothing* could prevent me from doing it. So anguish is indeed the experience of Nothingness, hence it isn't a psychological phenomenon. It's an existential structure of human reality, it's simply freedom becoming conscious of itself as being its own nothingness.

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Sartre's notebooks are full of such meditations. Taken together, they reveal a mind that does not so much *practice* philosophy as *exude* it; anything and everything, the whole range of his experience, is immediately taken up and digested by reflection. The smallest detail of his or his colleagues' behavior, the most trivial news report: for Sartre they are "understood" only when translated out of their native element and subjected to systematic philosophical probing. In one revealing passage, Sartre wrote that "The truth is, I treat my feelings as ideas: with an idea, one pushes it till it cracks—or finally becomes 'what it really was.'"

Sartre's tremendous appetite for abstraction and his suspicion of the life of feeling is particularly evident in his uncompromising, absolutist approach to the cardinal existentialist virtues of authenticity and freedom. In *Being and Nothingness,* for example, Sartre defines freedom as a spontaneous "upsurge" that is "beyond causes, motives, ends." Sartre's discussion of freedom, both in the notebooks and in *Being and Nothingness,* is elusive to say the least; but it is worth noting that without "causes, motives, or ends" the idea of freedom must remain empty. For if it is to be more than mere accident or spontaneity, if it is not to be arbitrary, then freedom must be limited by particular choices that are based on intelligible criteria—criteria that are in some sense given, not (as Sartre would have it) "freely produced." In default of such criteria, freedom can be little more than an invigorating slogan. Nevertheless, while he values it above all else, freedom for Sartre is more man's fate and burden than choice; ineradicable, it is yet too absolute to be fully grasped or realized; hence one is not so much privileged as "condemned to be free."

And while anything like a definition of authenticity is hard to come by in Sartre's work, it is clear that (at least through *Being and Nothingness*) he understood it to be characterized chiefly by the individual's defiant assertion of unqualified freedom in the face of an essentially absurd reality. And since unqualified freedom entails unqualified responsibility, authenticity, as Sartre insisted in the notebooks, meant being "totally responsible for one's life." "In short," he wrote, "I was seeking the absolute, I wanted to be an absolute, and that's what I called morality."

Of course the problem is that the absolute, by nature completely abstract, is too empty to serve as a criterion for morals or a cue for authenticity. But as a rhetorical trope, allegiance to the absolute can exert a powerful appeal. And Sartre's understanding of authenticity, tinged as it is with such Romantic longing, exploits that appeal to the hilt: "In relation to Gauguin, Van Gogh and Rimbaud," he noted in an early notebook entry, "I have a distinct inferiority complex because they managed to destroy themselves . . . . I am more and more convinced that, in order to achieve authenticity, something has to snap."

It follows that, in Sartre's view, authenticity flourishes best in extreme situations. After a brief leave in Paris, for example, he remarked that "it's much easier to live decently and authentically in wartime than in peacetime." But like so much in Sartre's notebooks—indeed, like so much in his work generally—this statement is at once arresting yet open to serious question. What gives it an air of plausibility is the truth that exceptional situations can call forth exceptional virtues. Plunged into crisis, men and women often experience moments of moral clarity that are rare in everyday life. And they sometimes respond to such situations with uncommon selflessness and valor.

But does this mean that it is easier to live "decently and authentically" during war than in peace? On the contrary, hasn't war time and again been the occasion of profound moral degradation and anarchy? The notion that it is somehow easier to live "authentically" in war than in the "bourgeois" stability of peace will suggest itself seriously only to someone who discounts the importance of ordinary social life in forming our ideas of authenticity, someone for whom "the authentic" is paradigmatically a lonely battle of an aloof and isolated

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self. "I rather think I was authentic before my leave," Sartre wrote. "Probably," he explained, "because I was alone."

Just how aloof and isolated Sartre conceives the self to be is exemplified in his contention that "the first value and first object of will is: to be its own foundation." Or, as he put it—somewhat more bluntly—in *Being and Nothingness,* "the best way to conceive the fundamental project of human reality is to say that man is the being whose project is to be God." This is not of course to suggest that Sartre believes that God exists. On the contrary, he tells us in the notebooks that he has been an atheist since the age of twelve. And he proceeds, in a later passage, to describe God as an "*impossible synthesis* of in-itself and for-itself, of total opacity and total freedom, the *causa sui* . . ." (my emphasis). Yet according to Sartre, the idea of God, though self-contradictory, functions as the ineluctable (if usually unacknowledged) ideal to which we all aspire. Mankind, he writes in *Being and Nothingness,* is "perpetually haunted by a totality . . . without being able to be it."

The thought that man's "fundamental project" is to be his own foundation—that is, to be God—stands at the center of Sartre's philosophy. And this is also to say that Sartre's philosophy is saturated with what the tradition called pride. "For what is pride," asked Augustine, "except a perverse kind of exaltation? For it is a perverse kind of exaltation to abandon the basis on which the mind should be firmly fixed, and to become, as it were, based on itself." It underlies, for example, the famous—and deeply Schopenhauerean—conclusion to the main text of *Being and Nothingness,* that "man is a useless passion"—"useless" because his every action is haunted by a desire that for a mortal, finite creature is essentially self-contradictory: the desire to be completely sovereign, autonomous, self-sufficient, the desire to be God. And it provides the philosophical conviction that justifies Sartre's constitutional uneasiness with anything that threatens to compromise his sense of mastery and control. "I am nothing but pride and lucidity," he confesses at one point in the notebooks; and whatever impinges on that pride or obscures that lucidity will be a source of anguish.

The situation that Sartre outlines takes on tragic dimensions when one realizes that the catalogue of threats to man's pride basically includes the whole of existence: anything organic, mutable, uncertain, anything *real* that exists independently of man's will and thought is immediately suspect. "The essential thing," Sartre's Antoine Roquentin explains in *Nausea,* "is contingency. I mean that one cannot define existence as necessity." Hence the "horrible ecstasy" that Roquentin experiences in the face of the roots of a chestnut tree:

> The chestnut tree pressed itself against my eyes. Green rust covered it half-way up; the bark, black and swollen, looked like boiled leather . . . . I realized that there was no half-way house between non-existence and this flaunting abundance. If you existed, you had to *exist all the way,* as far as mouldiness, bloatedness, obscenity were concerned. In another world, circles, bars of music keep their pure and rigid lines. But existence is a yielding . . . .

Like Sartre himself, Roquentin finds the organic world—unwieldy and subject as it is to change and decay—a frightening and vertiginous affront to pride. What Roquentin craves is a pristine, necessary world of pure abstraction, a world where everything is subject to the dictates of thought; his "circles and bars of music," rather like the stable inherent "beauty of figures" of "something straight or round" that Plato praises in the *Philebus,* answer to this desire: completely comprehensible, they do not challenge his demand for mastery and control.

Even language is a source of anguish. Roquentin dreams of a language that can "catch the secret smiles of things seen absolutely without men," that can articulate "a discreet, tenacious meaning—very precise, but escaping from the words for ever." But this means that he seeks a language *without* words, a language that would be fully com-

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mensurate with what it describes, a language *beyond* any merely human language, which never captures things just as they are; what he seeks, in short, is the language of God.

Sartre's understanding of man's fundamental project also has profound implications for his view of relations with other people. If one desires to be God, then the very existence of others will be felt as a threatening infringement of one's sovereignty. Because man's pride demands complete self-sufficiency, relations with other people are from the beginning cast into the essentially antagonistic mold of power relations, the mold of a Hobbesian "bellum omnium contra omnes." It follows that, as Sartre wrote in *Being and Nothingness,* "conflict is the original meaning of being-for-others." Indeed, from this point of view, as Garcin exclaimed near the end of *No Exit,* "L'Enfer, c'est les Autres": (Hell is other people.) Not without reason is this line so widely identified with the Sartrean philosophy. Sartre's basic view of "Concrete Relations with Others," as he put it in the title of one of the most influential chapters of *Being and Nothingness,* is evident in his rhetoric. He speaks throughout his work—even in the more or less private pages of his notebooks—not of "other people" or "human relations" but always of "the Other," as if this strangely impersonal, dehumanizing locution named our most common experiences of other people.

Not surprisingly, sexuality, which continually reminds man of his lack of self-sufficiency and fundamental neediness, is especially problematic for Sartre. It offers an unparalleled field for the exercise of power but at the same time it constitutes a tremendous threat to autonomy. Hence Sartre's notorious description of female sexuality in *Being and Nothingness*:

> The obscenity of the feminine sex is that of everything which "gapes open." It is an *appeal to being* as all holes are. In herself woman appeals to a strange flesh which is to transform her into a fullness of being by penetration and dissolution . . . . Beyond any doubt her sex is a mouth and a voracious mouth which devours the penis—a fact which can easily lead to the idea of castration.

Similar passages abound in the notebooks: ". . . the hole is often resistance. It must be forced, in order to pass through. Thereby it is already feminine. It is resistance by Nothingness, in other words modesty. This is obviously why it attracts sexuality (will to power, rape, etc.)." "Obviously"? Sartre offers these observations as rigorous descriptions of "one of the most fundamental tendencies of human reality—the tendency to fill." But are they really anything more than symptoms of Sartre's own psychopathology, based in the end on his obsession with autonomy and dressed up in the language of philosophy? Whatever insight into sexuality and human relations such meditations may provide, they surely give weight to Iris Murdoch's description of Sartre as "a connoisseur of the abnormal."

Sartre's existentialist rhetoric bristles with condemnations of "reification" and treating people as objects—as "means" rather than "ends." But as these notebooks abundantly reveal, both his temperament and underlying view of man incline him to do just that. "Nothing is dearer to me than the freedom of those I love," Sartre writes in a passage in which he discusses seduction, "but the fact is this freedom is dear to me provided I don't respect it at all. It's a question not of suppressing it, but of actually violating it . . . . that's what the desire to be loved means: to hit the Other in the Other's absolute freedom." He goes on to note the "impossibility . . . of conceiving a happy love *after* the seduction. Once the woman had been conquered, I no longer had any idea what to do with her." Sartre admits that this view of love is "utterly inauthentic," but at the same time he insists that it is "the commonest and strongest form of love" and he fails, either in the notebooks or in *Being and Nothingness,* to provide a convincing description of what a more "authentic" version of love would look like.

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Indeed, without the erotic charge that allows for seduction, Sartre finds that he is basically uninterested in people. Friendship "bores" him, he tells us, and his relations with men tend to be tenuous and superficial. "In short, there's one half of humanity that hardly exists for me." The ideal of self-sufficiency renders the pleasures of ordinary friendship superfluous. "I think I have no *need* of friends," Sartre writes, "because, basically, I don't need anybody . . . . I prefer to derive everything from myself."

It is, I think, fair to describe Sartre's view of human relations as somber. But interestingly, Sartre himself would have rejected the characterization. "Seriousness," in fact, was his great enemy. Thus in the concluding pages of *Being and Nothingness,* in a section entitled "Existentialist Ethics," Sartre attacks "the spirit of seriousness," primarily because it compromises freedom by affirming values that are in some sense "transcendent"—that is, given independently of human subjectivity. And near the end of the notebooks Sartre reflects that he has "never wanted to live seriously. I've been able to put on a show—to know pathos, and anguish, and joy. But never, never have I known seriousness. My whole life has been just a game: sometimes long and tedious, sometimes in bad taste—but a game. And this war is just a game for me." Sartre defines "game" as "the happy metamorphosis of the contingent into the gratuitous," and alludes for support to Schiller's celebrated contention that "Man plays only when he is in the full sense of the word a man, and *he is only wholly Man when he is playing.*" But it is important to note that Sartre ignores the caveat with which Schiller immediately precedes this passage: "Man shall *only play* with Beauty, and he shall play *only with Beauty.*" Though man is "serious with the agreeable, the good, the perfect," writes Schiller, "with Beauty he plays." Schiller's task here is not to subvert "seriousness" *tout court,* but to insure that the realm of beauty and aesthetics remains free from the intrusion of moralistic imperatives. Sartre, however, refuses such distinctions. Instead, he embraces a deep, self-centered aestheticism that would regard the whole of existence—even his lovers, even war—as an untoward eruption of contingency that can be disarmed only by being mastered and transformed into a game of his own device.

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Notebook

The legacy of Punk Rock

by Michael Brandow

I made a first acquaintance with the punk scene as it had developed in Detroit in the late Seventies. A bored adolescent, I hoped that regular visits to Detroit's most dangerous neighborhoods would put in the past all my suburban, middle-class antecedents and bring to the surface the feeling that I was destined to be a misfit. The most extreme solution the punk scene offered was to take the idea of "dress" and gather it close, so as to include the very body; the cutting of the skin was supposed to give the impression of a fashion somehow more profound. In Detroit the ground for this punk mind-set had been broken as early as 1968, when Iggy Stooge —considered the founder of the transatlantic movement eventually called Punk Rock— rolled on glass, vomiting and singing "Now I Wanna Be Your Dog." In the end, though, I was disillusioned with the otherworldliness of suicide chic and unwilling to make such a commitment to style. Despite my best efforts, I never felt like a real punk, and so chose "conformity" over physical deformation and the drug-induced depletion of one's youth, those signs of a true calling.

Before the effects of this antidote to adolescence wore off, I took part in a scheme to spread punk deep into the suburbs. My friend Melissia called the *Detroit News* to offer an interview with "real" punks. This was a rebellion in itself, since few real punks had the attention span required for speech. One could only hazard guesses at their code of manners, the food they ate, etc. Even when journalists used cautious diplomacy, no precious inside views of the "cutting edge" ever penetrated the punks' wall of spit and snide remarks.

This unwritten code of silence was broken for suburban Detroiters when our small group of would-be punks made the new punk "life-style" palatable to a general audience. The "Style" reporter explained in the plainest of terms:

> Sometimes wearing all black makes Michael Brando and Melissia Bryan feel like listening to experimental music at home instead of dancing wild at the Punk bar.

Much to my parents' relief, my name had been misspelled. Even though the article explained nothing, my friends and I were quickly shunned by eminent members of the punk community.

Arriving in New York recently, I suffered a renewed fascination for the aesthetic of the punk scene. In the East Village—a mere observer this time—I had an unobstructed view of punk and the many fads that have grown out of it, which I found in greater abundance and diversity than I imagined was still possible. All the schisms of punk were there: New Wavers, who seek, with their rhinestones, chiffon, and shawl collars, to make life into an eternal Senior Prom; punks proper, still tending their self-inflicted wounds; brass-knuckled "skinheads"; and

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New Romantics, whose exotic images of pyramids find their way onto so many East Village canvases. A closer look, though, revealed that the "movements" have more in common than the variations of style imply; and it exposed certain myths.

"Punk Rock" first became a large sect in working-class London, which has led to the assumption that one must be of the working class to be a punk. (In the East Village's Tompkins Square there hangs—flag-like—graffiti imploring: "Stop Gentrification.") In fact, although the East Village provides the general background of poverty and struggle that appeals to punk sensibilities, it's difficult to distinguish between the people who live there by choice and those who live there by necessity. (I imagine many trust funds being dispersed, discreetly, from cash machines in other neighborhoods.) Moreover, "punk" does not describe a particular age group, or a phase that one necessarily grows out of. The term can now be assigned to those artists, writers, actors, drifters, and art patrons who share certain attitudes: namely, a feigned aversion to fame and wealth, and a high regard for the "purity" of the creative process. In the East Village, this comes down to one essential dictum: "fashion fucks" are to be avoided. Under this rubric fall: 1) wealthy patrons of the arts; 2) artists who've "sold out" to galleries north, south, or west of the East Village; 3) "established" critics of any kind (which excludes, of course, critics from *The Village Voice*); and 4) anyone who takes seriously any of the above.

What this amounts to is a kind of cold-war aesthetic in which the artist, pure and unspoiled in his ostensibly unaffiliated state of nature, resists the evil forces of the market. An "alternative" play performed recently at the 8BC Club on Eighth Street provides a ready-made allegory. In *Pinko: The Artist in Spite of Himself,* Pinko is a ghetto graffiti artist whose child-poet-like genius is molested by greedy managers seeking to "establish" him. At one pole is the "artist," whose noble title has been debased in a free-market society. At the other pole is "business," represented by East Coast galleries and West Coast mass media, who share a quantitative love for art and a highly developed taste for cocaine. The play begins as a parody of both sides, but ends by identifying with one. Pinko, impotent in his new environment, decides to "give it all up" in order to return to the ghetto where he can, and does, continue creating. The audience is delighted.

The 8BC Club was conceived in the same "purist" spirit as the play. In a series of sooty, gutted buildings, 8BC would seem to stand as a portent of what could happen to any city when a civilization dies. Like many clubs in the area, its facade has no sign, lights, or other immodesties. The front is marked by a baby, sculptured in structured steel, jutting toward the street, pink and screaming as it's pulled toward the entry by grisly hands. Inside, on a crude brick wall behind the bar, hangs a tall, gory painting: civilization, in the form of a woman, struggles to support falling columns as she is ravaged by thin dogs, thus completing the apocalyptic theme suggested on the street.

The East Village's fashioned atmosphere of decay, instead of striking me as a statement about New York's present condition, came through as a message even more banal. The play, the club, and the neighborhood fit into a long-term effort of punks to insulate themselves from what they see as "traditional" norms and from any sort of criticism that could be waged against them—in short, from the rest of civilization. I was taken aback to find, after an extended absence from the "movement," that this sort of thing still sells—to see, long after the avowal that "punk is dead," an attempt at such autonomy of form and adolescent non-answerability. In the East Village the belief persists that one can play a game with no rules.

Despite the nihilism of the punk scene, though, there is still a search for the absolute, the totally new and unprecedented. It brings to mind those episodes of the punk-cult series *Star Trek* where our heroes are confronted with some new life force that Spock says is "impossible" according

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to present knowledge, and unexplainable given current levels of technology. The vague criterion of inexplicability underscores "important" painting, sculpture, and theater in the East Village. The forms change, but an unwritten code determines what will be accepted. In the plastic arts, what might be called "neo-primitivism," with its emphasis on intuition, is a dominant movement.

It is precisely this mixture of unjustified cynicism and latent Sixties idealism that makes tepid satire the favorite kind of "alternative" theater for East Village society. Unfortunately, the dadaesque, self-negating art of cynicism and the baroque self-confidence of idealism are as slow to digest as the bubble gum I used to swallow as a child. In short, the attitude that "it's all been done before" is inconsistent with the desire to create a pure art. Had the Pinkos of the world truly believed in their message of pure expression, they would have opted for the only "true" aesthetic of silence.

One thing must be said in favor of punk people: with the insolence and contradictions comes an admirable commitment to Fashion. Unfailing attention is paid to clothing, hair, music; ideally, the visual and musical are kept at a safe distance from the verbal, which is less impressive. The best costumes are strictly one-of-a-kind, patched together with unlikely materials and objects. Heads are treated with the same care my father used to give to his hedges. Music is drawn eclectically from near and far. The result is often a very tailored beauty that cannot be achieved halfheartedly. Inasmuch as form follows function, the need to rebel is the driving force behind the style. Ironically, the very pretensions are what define "genuine" punk. It's for this reason that punk imitators—the followers of Cyndi Lauper as she was displayed on the cover of *People* magazine—are at best engaging in what Henry James called "social empiricism"—they have the tiara and the train, but haven't come up with an occasion for wearing them. Only when executed by an elite of rebels with a questionable cause is punk fashion in any sense "pure."

Thus, although I'm no longer a participant in the punk scene, I've once again become a purist. Call me traditional, but few of us manage to keep ahead of this race. Most prefer to step aside and keep things as they should be: as we remember them.

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Letters

Leonard Bernstein

To the Editors:
Though I liked Mr. Lipman's essay on Leonard Bernstein ("Lenny on Our Minds," June, 1985), I'm afraid I'm guilty of believing Bernstein wears too many caps. I too am disappointed by his achievements as a composer since he stepped down from the Philharmonic—oh what goods we expected from him!

Mr. Lipman's observation of the harmful effects of the Sixties on serious culture rings true. Lukas Foss, while director of the Philharmonic in Buffalo in the late Sixties, brought in the Grateful Dead for a psychedelic light-show concert, an event that was not part of the regular subscription series. It was for the Philharmonic a nadir, and I doubt the Dead circulate a tape of the night.

Thomas Putnam
Amherst, NY

The new art history

To the Editors:
To borrow from Wittgenstein, what can be shown need not be said, but if what can be shown still needs to be explained to undergraduates, it need not be explained at length. Or, as my former Sensei used to quote from the Chinese, a picture is worth a thousand words. Alas, not in departments of art history, which brings me to Mr. Kramer's review of T. J. Clark's *The Painting of Modern Life* in the March issue of *The New Criterion.*

Trying to explain or understand Clark's attitude toward modernism, Mr. Kramer supposes a certain disappointment among liberals and leftish-oriented intellectuals, a disappointment with modernism for its not having been as revolutionary as it seemed at one time. Perhaps. There are, I think, other reasons. The class analysis of Marxism itself might explain the Marxist art historians. Clark is not the only art historian who is a Marxist; there are others, also young, in English universities. The representatives of the old school are, after all, getting old; some have already gone. I am thinking of men such as Kenneth Clark and Anthony Blunt. One wonders whether the present young Marxist art historians, or literary critics, come from the same social background as the members of the old school.

But there is another possible explanation which need not travel along class lines. It is this: T. J. Clark is teaching and "doing" art history in a university. And an American university at that, which means an institution of the capitalist superstructure organized on the model of the capitalist corporation; and this fact affects the style, the prose, the questions asked, the problems posed. It is no longer *le style, c'est l'homme même* of Buffon; but rather, *le style, c'est l'institution.* This is not to say that Harvard is "red"; but that art history is one thing in a university and something different in a rival institution, the museum.

I speak from experience. I learned what art history I know in a museum. My art history courses at Queens College had little long-range effect on

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me, but working in a museum did. In a museum, you read and think about art and art history in the presence of works of art, and doing art history can mean writing catalogues, or writing bulletin articles, or setting up exhibitions, and all of these can be and usually are prompted by works of art, which you can see, which you can touch, which you can be with. Working in a museum, I developed a certain feeling for the eighteenth century, a certain non-conceptual knowledge, or shall I say a certain non-bookish knowledge, since for years I lived with pictures, sculpture, furniture. One could think and then go down to the galleries for an impression, to check on a hunch, to wonder about a statement or attribution; one could sit in front of a picture, walk about sculptures, visit period rooms, even draw from the reserves in order to live with pictures in one's office. One could prepare lectures in the presence of certain pictures. Thus art history in a museum was entirely different from art history in a classroom. In a museum, I could write a type of article I no longer can working in a university, and I could do art history as exhibitions.

Art history in universities, even if there is a gallery attached, is first of all (in the central space of a university, the classroom) an *absence*: of works of art! Instead you have slides. When a literary historian comments on a work of literature, he has the work in front of him; the text is there. But the art historian does not have the work. He is at one remove from the object of his thought or his discourse. He is looking at a substitute for the work: a slide. (When art history means reading accounts of art history, it is at two removes from its object.) Art history is really the history of slides, made possible, as Walter Benjamin saw, by photography.

Now, looking at slides or photographs is one thing, looking at paintings something else. The effect is quite different. You can fall in love with a painting; hardly with a slide. The slide is really a lie. Consider: slides are all the same size, be they of Watteau's *Mezzetin,* David's *Oath of the Horatii,* or Rembrandt's *The Night Watch*; they are all the same size on the screen or the wall. Thus at one remove art history is an illusion; at two removes it is an autonomous, academic, scholarly exercise based on photos and informed opinion. In a sense one might argue that the photographs of works of art are really, to play with language, pre-texts.

Art history today is prose, a branch of literary scholarship not always practiced by people who write good prose. But art history is also spoken discourse; it is discourse in a special space, a dim classroom; it is a voice originating just slightly away from that illusion of a painting or sculpture or work of architecture projected on a flat surface. More than that, however, art history is a discourse upon non-discourse, or, in the case of Renaissance or Baroque painting, a discourse upon an alternative language, a symbolic language addressed to the eye rather than the ear. In this case, the art historian may have recourse to iconography and actually teach his class how to read pictures. But what to do with paintings which are not subject to that particular type of treatment or which cannot be translated into ordinary language? One can talk about style, painting as painting, aesthetic quality, influences, sources, etc.; but—and this is the interesting thing about art history in classrooms—talking specifically about art in connection with the projected works—the slides shining in the dark—will never by itself fill up the time allotted to a course. What can be shown need not really be said. To be sure, a great many art historians do in effect translate painting into prose; they say what they see. But I feel utterly foolish doing that. And so: what is to be done? Or in today's universities: how do you fill in course time?

There are several possible answers: 1) Show all the slides you have in your collection. That is usually very effective to fill in the time: it takes moments to put the slide in the machine, moments to take it out, and even though there is not much to be said about each slide projected, the more slides you show, the more the words accumulate and lo! the bell rings and the class is over. 2) Talk around the paintings: talk about Brittany, or clouds along the north coast of France, or identify a woman combing herself, made up of tiny dots, as Seurat's mistress, or talk about the harmful effects of absinthe, or about the art market, the public, etc. Since you cannot say a thousand words about the picture itself, say three thousand about the circumstances of its existence. 3) Invent a new art history.

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Now, a new art history can only be produced within a university environment or university art history department, since it presupposes the withering away of the aesthetic sensibility, or its absence to begin with. This withering away, this drying out of the soul, which allows the mind to gain full hegemony over the psyche, can only occur within a university. This triumph of mind —and let me be more precise by saying triumph of abstraction—is facilitated by the absence signified above, the absence of art, of beauty, and the concomitant presence of functionality: functional classrooms, functional students in functional dress, functional textbooks and functional final exams. What happens when you are away from works of art for a long time is that the sensibility dries up; the brain takes over, and you forget, when you have to talk about art, that works of art are just that: paintings, sculptures, not pre-texts, not occasions for discourse, not slides. The domination of the brain over the sensibility is also further enhanced by the fact that you have to "talk about art," you have to "teach art history" to immature students who, at least on the undergraduate level, sometimes take art history courses merely to fill credit and distribution requirements. But these career-oriented students still expect from art—art experienced at one or two removes—an importance, a meaning, a weight that art itself might not have. Art has to *say* something, these students think, it has to *mean* something; after all, they are going to be tested on it! They are too young to appreciate an art form which does not prove something in the manner of some textbook demonstration.

The absence of art, the presence of functionality, time to fill, courses to teach, the limits of discourse in the face of painting—these are the conditions which make possible the new art history. One might ask, of course: Why not go on with the old, that Harvard-Fogg tradition that Mr. Kramer so admirably described in his article? In part because some of its masters are retiring. But there are other causes at work. The mind can become impatient with established approaches. Remember art historians in universities, unlike curators in museums, must repeat courses over and over: the discourse wears out, the ideas become banal, the professor becomes bored. The traditional art history begins to look stale. But there is something else. The professor in the university is faced with masses of students and a career situation in which he also faces near masses of colleagues. And among these there are bright, impatient, fresh, energetic, young people. They have new ideas not because of the Sixties, but because they just got through writing their dissertations, which allowed them years to keep up with recent research and to get in touch with the latest theories, whereas their elders were stuck teaching, which takes time away from research and new theoretical formulations. The young are expected to strike out boldly in new directions. They also want to be noticed in that crowd of job seekers, and they still have enthusiasm and they still believe.

Yet, compared to other disciplines in the humanities, art history in this country has been very slow in catching up with innovation in critical theory, assuming, of course, that to espouse these new theories in art history is desirable. As Richard Brilliant put it recently in *Humanities*: "Most American art historians can be divided into interest groups, separated often from one another by specialization and marked by a great resistance to theoretical movements in contemporary criticism—structuralism, hermeneutics, semiotics, reception theory—unless they are already passé" ("What has happened in Art History," *Humanities,* Vol. 6, No. 1, February, 1985). Mr. Brilliant is quite right; one need but look at the textbooks offered by publishers to see how *retardataire* art history is in relation to other disciplines.

What awaits art history, in sum, is what has already happened to literary history. The attack on literature, analyzed by René Wellek years ago, is now well underway. American art historians find themselves under severe attack from imports and foreign ideas concocted in Paris and English universities, imported from foreign disciplines such as literary criticism, semiotics, structuralism, language theory, Marxism, and probably more "isms" to come. Marxism à la T. J. Clark is merely a left flanking movement, only one committed force supported at some distance by temporary allies under various battle flags. The center itself can be discounted—the main thrusts are on the left and the right.

The results of these attacks are wondrous to

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behold. The moment is, to say the least, dialectical: a new art historical dimension is being born under our very eyes as art history threatens to be taught and thought about at three removes from its traditional objects of discourse. If the flanking movement on the left triumphs first and reaches its objective before the right flanking attack succeeds, art history will disappear into the history of various superstructures; if the right flank wins, art history will be transformed into a species of sublime *Glassperlenspiel* parallel to literary deconstruction. In either case the center will not hold. Traditional art history is as much a thing of the past as traditional bourgeois society, which as anyone with eyes, mind, and a sense of history can see has been superseded by the consumer society. The new history, non-crude Marxist or otherwise, will assume the form of a pure critical discourse in an inter-campus critical field limited at one extreme by some allusions and references to well-chosen slides, at the other extreme by language itself. Such purity can only obtain in a university milieu. It can hardly obtain in a museum where the high abstractions of such a discourse would stutter to a stop when uttered before works of art. As Paul Valéry once put it, *la définition beau est facile, c'est ce qui rend muet*. But such discourse is eminently suited to slides projected in a darkened classroom, which is the space of art historical discourse par excellence.

What we are beginning to discern then, in books such as that of T. J. Clark, is the withering away of the traditional art history in the dry, hot air of the higher education. After the death of literary history, the death of art history.

R. G. Saisselin
University of Rochester
Rochester, NY

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